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*The Trouble with RAMSI: Reexamining
the Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands*

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In the wake of the July 2003 Australian-led intervention in Solomon Islands, a debate has surfaced in the media and in academic circles regarding whether or not Solomon Islands was a “failed state.” New Zealand academic Ross McDonald and journalist Michael Field have argued that the failed state brand exaggerated the level of ethnic unrest in an otherwise peaceful archipelago comprised of tight-knit communities (PFNet/PINA Nius 2003; Field 2003). Conversely, while acknowledging that the “petri-dish for transnational threats” metaphor is unhelpful and overstated (see Wainwright 2003, 13), Jon Fraenkel from the University of the South Pacific has claimed that Solomon Islands was overall a failed (or at least failing) state before the intervention (quoted in PFNet/PINA Nius 2003). Still others have pointed out the links between the timing of the intervention and Australian big-picture foreign policy imperatives, such as national security and the alliance with the United States, which are essentially unrelated to Solomon Islands (Kabutaulaka 2005; Dinnen 2004).

Despite this flurry of commentary, there has been no sustained critical examination of the failed state concept itself or evaluation of its limitations for explaining the conflict in Solomon Islands and, consequently, the prospects of the intervention. It is precisely this gap that I aim to address in this article, by exploring the problems associated with the failed states literature in general and its applicability to Solomon Islands in particular, and by providing an alternative framework from which to examine the roots and possible trajectories of conflict in Solomon Islands. The urgency of such an undertaking has become sadly apparent with the eruption in April 2006 of violent protests in Honiara—a development that has undermined the intervention’s hitherto unblemished profile in Aus-

tralia.¹ In light of these events the need to examine conventional wisdom about failed states is even more pressing.

Failed and failing states have become an increasingly central concern for the world's most powerful states in the post-cold war period, particularly since September 11. This focus represents a return of sorts to the cold-war blending of security and economic development, albeit with a distinctly neoliberal flavor (Berger and Weber 2006, 202). The common conception of state failure cannot be understood in isolation from the political and ideological shifts toward neoliberalism that have taken place since the end of the cold war, alongside the deepening of processes associated with economic globalization. However, the impact of these changes on the ways in which state failure is understood is not acknowledged in most of the policy analyses of the intervention in Solomon Islands—or indeed in much of the literature on failed states, on which these analyses are based—which tend to view state failure as a measurable condition and as an ahistorical phenomenon. By framing state failure in terms of a lack of good governance and political will, the literature obscures the structural forces that generate the conditions that give rise to the symptoms of failure. This article is not concerned with historicizing and contextualizing depictions of failed states, though, because much has already been written on this matter (Bilgin and Morton 2002). Rather, I hope to demonstrate that without a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and dimensions of conflict in Solomon Islands than that encapsulated in the failed state concept, the long-term viability of the intervention and future political stability in this Pacific archipelago state remain uncertain, as the April 2006 riots demonstrated.

Solomon Islands went through a difficult period between 1998 and 2003. The crisis began in mid-1998 with skirmishes between an indigenous Guadalcanalese militia—the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM)—and Malaitan settlers (later organized in the Malaita Eagle Force—MEF). It later evolved into a protracted period of low-level violence, intimidation, and general lawlessness. Overall, the crisis is estimated to have caused the displacement of 35,000 Solomon Islanders and the death of about 200. It has also devastated the economy, with the gross domestic product free-falling 14 percent in 2000 and 9 percent in 2001.² After rejecting earlier requests for assistance, the Australian government agreed in June 2003 to accept then Solomon Islands Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza's call for help and lead a Pacific Islands Forum intervention force designed, in Australian Prime Minister John Howard's words, to “arrest this downward

spiral, which, if not addressed, could result in the total collapse of the Solomon Islands' governance and sovereignty. . . . A failed state would not only devastate the lives of the peoples of the Solomons but could also pose a significant security risk for the whole region" (2003).

Minh Nguyen has argued that this was the first time an Australian government employed the prevention of state failure as a policy rationale. However, the term "failed state" had already been used extensively by other governments, most notably the United States and Britain, and in a rapidly growing body of literature (Nguyen 2005). Nguyen claimed that the Australian diagnosis of and responses to the situation in Solomon Islands have been established to a large extent on preexisting theoretical and empirical knowledge on state failure and state building. This framework pertains to the particular form the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention has assumed by simultaneously providing the parameters for the very classification of Solomon Islands as a failing or a failed state, the nature and scope of the threats associated with this condition, and the sort of strategies advocated to alleviate and prevent state failure.

The literature views state failure primarily as a matter of governance, defined narrowly as "the exercise of power or authority—political, economic, administrative or otherwise—to manage a country's resources and affairs" (AusAID 2000, 3). Policy analysts and bureaucrats have argued that Solomon Islands, like other failed or failing states, has been suffering from endemic poor governance, marked by dysfunctional institutions, widespread corruption, a stagnating economy, and growing lawlessness (Wainwright 2003; DFAT 2004). From such perspectives, because the state failed to provide basic political goods to the majority of the populace, it eventually lost authority and the country descended into chaos. In response, RAMSI's long-term goal, following the immediate targets of halting violence and restoring law and order, has been defined as promoting good governance by helping Solomon Islanders rebuild their country's institutions and institutional capacity and integrity. Good governance has also been seen as the key to the long-term sustainability of the economic reforms that RAMSI initiated and to the stabilization of the security situation in a post-RAMSI Solomon Islands (Warner 2004).

The persistence of poor governance in Solomon Islands is often explained as an outcome of the clash between strong premodern Melanesian institutions—embodying traditional values—and weaker modern state institutions, representing legal-rational modes of governance, in Max Weber's

formulation (1978). Elsinia Wainwright, whose June 2003 Australian Strategic Policy Institute report provided the blueprint for the intervention, argued that the weakness of state institutions is a result of the British protectorate administration's lack of interest in state building during the colonial era (Wainwright 2003; see also DFAT 2004). She argued that at independence in July 1978, the colonialists left the newborn state with a very weak and badly designed institutional framework for modern statehood. The situation was made worse because the state had to compete for legitimacy with powerful and well-entrenched premodern traditional institutions. This view is shared by many Solomon Islanders, including former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni, who once famously said that Solomon Islands was "a state conceived but never born" (quoted in Wainwright 2003, 20). Others have gone so far as to argue that Melanesian culture is profoundly incompatible with the sort of institutions required for the proper functioning of a modern state in general and the Westminster system in particular (Turnbull 2002). The perception that traditional institutions and values have weakened the establishment and operation of the modern state, and therefore spurred the emergence and escalation of the conflict in Solomon Islands, has contributed to RAMSI's top-down approach, which relies on the insertion of Australian personnel into most key positions in Solomon Islands public administration. Such actions are taken despite public declarations emphasizing the importance of indigenous ownership to the success of governance reforms.

A number of critics, most notably Solomon Islands academic Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, have questioned RAMSI's platform and its "state-centered" approach. Kabutaulaka made the important observation that in Solomon Islands there have always been significant power bases outside the state, and because RAMSI has not sought to engage these alternative and possibly useful sources of legitimate political power, it is breeding dependency. The key to sustainable indigenous governance in Solomon Islands, Kabutaulaka has argued, is a form of power sharing between the state and important societal institutions (2005).

Despite the advances of this view over RAMSI's heavy emphasis on the state, it still remains constrained by a state-society binary (which reifies a problematic distinction between traditional and modern institutions), and by a preoccupation with strengthening state capacity (viewed as an attribute external to social and political relationships). Missing is a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the development and dimensions of state power in Solomon Islands, addressing such basic questions as: What

interests support state power? Who exercises this power, and for whom? And in what ways can the intervention affect state power? Answering these questions requires a theorization of the relationship between conflict, capitalist development, and state power in general and in the Solomon Islands context in particular. In this paper I draw on social conflict theory to examine conflict in relation to dynamic coalitions of interest struggling over the control and distribution of scarce state resources (see Hewison and others 1993). From this perspective the Solomon Islands conflict, rather than representing a crisis of governance, is primarily explained by the growing marginalization of key interests in Solomon Islands society, resulting from a number of systemic challenges to the complex and dense patronage networks that hitherto worked to mitigate the effects of highly uneven economic development.

In the next section, I begin by providing a critical examination of the failed states literature, as well as of some of RAMSI's critics. In the subsequent two sections I present an alternative framework for understanding the conflict in Solomon Islands, beginning with an analysis of governance and state power, followed by an examination of the conflict's main two stages. Ultimately, I argue that despite initial impressive successes in the area of law and order, RAMSI's pervasive reform and governance agenda exacerbates conflict in Solomon Islands. This is because the neoliberal "good governance" model for economic development RAMSI is seeking to implement generates dangerous and destabilizing social and political tensions in Solomon Islands. It is not my intention to provide new empirical data, but rather to shift the scope of the debate on RAMSI away from the limitations marked out by the failed state discourse.

WHAT'S IN A CONCEPT? THE FAILED STATES LITERATURE AND RAMSI

There are at least five interrelated theoretical assumptions underpinning the framework advanced by the failed states literature.³ First, the state is understood as an "entity" comprising institutions and not as a set of social and political structures within which groups struggle for control and access to state resources. Second, state institutions are defined in terms of their policy capacities, derived from an ideal-type hypothetical model of a legal-rational modern state, and not in terms of or in relation to domestic social and political relationships. Institutions' performance is then rated according to their capacity to carry out official functions effectively, cre-

ating a spectrum of state strength ranging from strong states with strong capacities at one end to failed states with weak or no capacities at the other. Third, this way of theorizing institutions sets up a dichotomous view of state and society. The relationship between the state apparatus and societal groups matters in this framework only to the extent that it hinders or promotes state capacity. Fourth, capacity is seen primarily as a matter of institutional design and therefore as susceptible to external influence and direction. And finally, strong capacities are linked to the effort to carry out global functions, be they economic or political. In this sense, good governance, which is said to facilitate sustainable economic development on the national level, is seen to underpin global governance. The international dimensions of state failure have become more pronounced following September 11 because the capacity of states to control their territories is now said to be linked directly to global security (Fukuyama 2005). Indeed, as Kabutaulaka and Sinclair Dinnen have persuasively argued, Australia's new interventionism in the Pacific is itself a result of the association of domestic governance with global threats (Kabutaulaka 2005; Dinnen 2004).

The notion of capacity is pivotal in this framework. In the failed states literature, capacity is understood as the ability of the state, through its various institutions, to carry out the myriad functions that are expected of a modern state. It is "the ability of states to plan and execute policies and to enforce laws cleanly and transparently" (Fukuyama 2005, 9). Capacity, then, is defined in terms of the effectiveness of governance processes rather than as a socially constituted phenomenon. Based on this definition, Wainwright diagnosed Solomon Islands in mid-2003 as a failing state because it had "virtually ceased to function as an *effective* national entity" (2003, 3; my italics).

Since the failed states literature defines institutions by their policy capacity, it sets up a dichotomous conceptualization of state and society. Social and political relationships are not seen as intrinsic to institutions, but only as constraints or obstacles to performance. The implicit assumption is that the institutions that make up the state are distinct from those of society because they have different, if sometimes complementary, roles. Some authors have gone so far as to view state and society as existing in a competitive relationship (eg, Wainwright 2003, 18). In cruder and more technocratic versions of the literature, the dichotomization of state and society has led to a near-exclusive focus on the structure and design of the formal institutions of the state apparatus (see DFAT 2004). There

is, however, a significant divergence between these so-called “state-centered” analyses, which characterize the official RAMSI position, and the more sophisticated literature on Solomon Islands—influenced by Joel S Migdal’s “state in society” framework (1988)—in which there is a genuine effort to contextualize state power. This approach is mostly associated with Kabutaulaka and the Australian National University’s State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) program.

The SSGM group has produced a number of rigorous and useful studies on village-level and grassroots governance and the interrelations between formal state institutions and informal societal associations, which help shed light on Solomon Islands social and political structures (eg, Scales and others 2002; Morgan 2005; Bennett 2002). However, even in this more advanced variant of the literature on Solomon Islands, the state–society binary is maintained; social and political relationships are not used to explain state behavior but are themselves explained in relation to the state’s capacity to implement policy and shape the rules and norms of society. This implicitly presumes that a distinction between state and society can be drawn and that state capacity itself is an objective attribute. Therefore, while some of these authors have been critical of RAMSI, they remain constrained by the same propensity to measure the effectiveness of governance in relation to an ideal-type hypothetical model. Because they have preconceived ideas about what constitutes state weakness and strength they often miss or misinterpret important dynamics.

The dichotomization of state and society in effect provides the rationale for external intervention. If the state, on the one hand, is understood as a set of governance institutions that are distinct from societal institutions and defined by their capacity to carry out certain tasks, and state capacity, on the other hand, is seen as an objective attribute, then it is a small step to conclude that external intervention can improve state capacity and thus prevent state failure by targeting the institutions that require assistance.

While state capacity in the failed states literature is usually measured against tangible and quantifiable performance indicators such as gross domestic product, economic growth, the unemployment rate, and public health figures (DFAT 2004), it is also often related to the more qualitative notion of legitimacy. Thus, Robert I Rotberg claimed: “Nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants. Their governments lose legitimacy, and the very nature of the particular nation-state itself becomes illegitimate in the hearts of a growing plurality of its citizens”

(2003, 1). Legitimacy, then, is viewed functionally as a reward for good performance, with capacity the key to both state strength and legitimacy. This means that legitimacy, like capacity, is also understood in principle as premised on maintaining *universal* standards of governance, rather than in terms of how a *particular* government responds to internal social and political pressures. Michael Fullilove has argued that the notion of state failure is somewhat misleading in the Solomon Islands context because it suggests that an effective state once existed. But because institutions were never properly formed, the modern state was never truly legitimate (Fullilove 2006; see also Wainwright 2003, 20).

This is an apolitical and functional version of legitimacy, which is unhelpful for explaining the emergence of political conflicts—a significant theoretical problem, since the presence of intractable conflicts of various kinds is precisely the characteristic shared by the states depicted as failed, including Solomon Islands. If legitimacy denotes the absence of serious challenges to the authority of the state's formal leadership, then it is difficult to accept that it is necessarily the outcome of improved state capacity. Arguably, it may be the case that conflict is actually caused by improvements in the capacity of the state apparatus to perform certain tasks not shored up by key interests.⁴ Furthermore, if Solomon Islands never had effective governance institutions and was therefore never legitimate, the question of timing arises: Why has the conflict erupted only in the late 1990s and not earlier? To answer this question we need to break free from the ideal-type “good governance” theoretical straightjacket that constrains the failed states literature and examine how conflict in Solomon Islands was averted prior to 1998 and what has subsequently changed to exacerbate societal tensions.

The functional theorization of legitimacy highlights the tendency of the failed states literature to conflate description with explanation. State failure is said to be caused by dysfunctional institutions that fail to provide political goods, and a failed state by definition is one that does not deliver political goods. State failure, in this view, is by and large caused by poor governance, and therefore the only long-term solution, as protracted and arduous as it may be, is the promotion, usually by outsiders, of good governance and institutional capacity—what Francis Fukuyama defined as state building (2005, 28). This is a circular and problematic argument, albeit a self-reinforcing one. Because institutions are defined in terms of their respective policy capacities and their performance is assessed against external and preexisting standards, the literature is replete with descrip-

tive, if extensive, institutional performance audits that are primarily aimed at measuring in what ways and to what degree a particular state deviates from a “proper,” functioning state.⁵ When conflicts emerge it is thus necessarily seen as stemming from the incapacity of the state’s institutions to perform their “true” functions properly, resulting in the state’s delegitimization. This view does not allow for the prospect that institutions may not be dysfunctional so much as expressive of a different set of interests than that which is supportive of the sort of policies associated with the good-governance model. In reality, “good” institutional design is just as likely to exacerbate conflict as it is to prevent it. This possibility is acknowledged to some extent in the literature, and indeed state building is often portrayed as an immensely difficult project with a patchy success record (Fullilove 2006, 1; Fukuyama 2005). Nevertheless, the failed states literature to date has failed to explain systematically why some interventions are more successful than others, or why conflicts emerge in some countries but not in others.⁶

To summarize, state failure is not an objective and measurable condition. Rather, it entails a number of questionable understandings about conflict that are based on a problematic and ahistorical theorization of the state and of institutions. In brief, conflict is portrayed in the literature as the outcome of poor governance and low state capacity. In Solomon Islands, poor governance is explained as a consequence of the weakness of modern institutions vis-à-vis traditional ones. In the next section I examine this argument and provide an alternative analysis of governance in Solomon Islands before and after the start of the conflict.

GOVERNANCE IN SOLOMON ISLANDS: MODERNITY, CUSTOM, AND LOW STATE CAPACITY?

An oft-heard and influential view is that the state in Solomon Islands has been weak since independence because the institutions and structures of modern statehood were imposed on a society—or indeed many societies—with markedly different traditional institutions that have proven resilient to change (DFAT 2004, 3; Wainwright 2003, 27). At one end of the spectrum, this position has led to efforts to undermine traditional influences by engendering capacity-building programs such as RAMSI to strengthen modern institutions. For example, Wainwright has argued that it is the relative weakness of modern institutions that has turned Solomon Islands into a failing state, and not the institutions’ profound unsuitability

to Melanesian societies. She claimed that if Solomon Islands had started off at independence with better-designed and stronger modern governance institutions, its development trajectory could have been very different and less erratic (Wainwright 2003, 20).

In contrast, the critics of the “state-centered” approach have assessed the strength of modern institutions in relation to the state’s ability to shape the rules and norms of society and in terms of the fit between state and society (Larmour 1998). They have argued that the former approach is too coercive and that traditional forms of governance should in fact be engaged to make national-level governance work better and improve state capacity (Kabutaulaka 2005; Morgan and McLeod 2006). The strengths of this approach are that it brings into question the nexus between institutional design and state capacity and pays more attention to forms of governance that do not correspond with the legal-rational “good governance” model.

Despite these important differences, both approaches share a relatively similar understanding of the connection between state–society relations and poor governance in Solomon Islands. In essence, poor governance is seen in terms of stunted modernization: the modern state is too weak to rein in premodern forces and therefore ends up captured by them. The approaches diverge mainly on the question of whether or not a successful state can or should incorporate some premodern Melanesian elements. However, the distinction between modernity and tradition is highly problematic.

Eric Hobsbawm distinguished between “invented tradition” and “custom” (1983). In traditional societies, he argued, custom or customary law does not preclude change up to a point, because it has to contend with life’s challenges. It builds on the past but it is not inflexible. The object of tradition, on the other hand, is precisely invariance, and it need not have any direct, factual link with the historical past to which it refers: “It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so interesting for historians of the past two centuries” (Hobsbawm 1983, 2).

In the context of the South Pacific, Roger Keesing built on Hobsbawm’s notion of the “invention of tradition” to argue that not only do contemporary representations of Melanesian culture and custom by political elites bear tenuous resemblance to the documented pasts of those societies, but that these very representations are themselves often derived from, or in

relation to, Western ideologies and can only be understood in the context of European colonization and decolonization (1989). In this sense, idealized versions of indigenous cultures can serve to perpetuate patterns of control and domination in the postcolonial era that are not dissimilar to those of the colonial era. Keesing pointed out that, ironically, often those who espouse these static views of the past are also “(in their political actions and life-styles) hell-bent on technology, progress, materialism, and ‘development’” (1989, 23).

Echoing Keesing, Jon Fraenkel has argued that the distinction between “imported” modern institutions and unchanging “indigenous” political structures in Solomon Islands is mechanistic and ahistorical:

It is over-simplistic to think of “introduced” modernity as ever subverted by unrelenting *kastom*. What was initially introduced has been deeply and irreversibly absorbed, and has become as much a part of perceived custom as that which has some formal continuity with age-old culture. Even customary compensation, which played such a critical role in the unfolding of the conflict, was itself profoundly influenced by colonial pacification, by the experience of Solomon Islanders on white-owned plantations, by the churches and by post-colonial governments, not least during the crisis itself. (2004, 12)

As we can see, Solomon Islands institutions do not fit neatly into a modern–customary dichotomy. Rather than being the static entities this binary implies, they have historically morphed and developed in response to changing economic, social, and political circumstances. While this fact does not deny the existence or significance of Melanesian custom, it highlights its socially constituted nature. Custom is not a fixed entity, somehow external to social interaction, on which there is unequivocal consensus. As with any social construct, it is contested and regularly invoked to legitimize a range of often-conflicting political ends.⁷ Viewing institutions through the modern–customary lens depoliticizes them because it removes their development from the context of political and ideological contestation. If we are to understand how institutions work, how and why they change, and, more importantly, what sort of conflicts are likely to emerge, we need to examine the social and political relationships that run through institutional structures, which interests are being promoted or marginalized, and how these relationships have changed over time in relation to capitalist development (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2006).

The modern–traditional dichotomy is also problematic for explaining how the state operates in Solomon Islands. Following Kevin Hewison,

Garry Rodan, and Richard Robison (1993, 4–5), I understand the state not simply as a set of institutions or a group of actors—modern or pre-modern—but as an expression of political power. State power is a set of complex social relationships that is dynamic and shapes the use of the state apparatus. Because they exist within a context of social relations, it is misleading to view the state or its apparatus as neutral. Consequently, state and society are not mutually exclusive. In reality, the formal and informal institutions of both are spheres in which political power is organized, exercised, or indeed challenged. Because power relationships cut across the imaginary boundaries of state and society, examining these relationships is more important for explaining change and conflict than focusing on the particular design of their physical institutional manifestations. Therefore, rather than attempting to explain diverging social and political outcomes with ahistorical and unchanging terms like modern and traditional, we must apply a political economy perspective to explain the changing contours of state power in Solomon Islands and the sort of conflicts that are likely to emerge.

Since the days of the British protectorate, economic development in Solomon Islands has mostly been premised on the extraction of natural resources by a small number of large-scale, foreign-owned operations. About 85 percent of the country's diverse population survives on subsistence agriculture and fishing, at times supported by small cash crops sold in local markets. In 1912 the colonial administration banned freehold land sale to non-Solomon Islanders in favor of a lease system, and so 87 percent of all land in Solomon Islands is still held by customary owners (Bennett 2002, 5; Kabutaulaka 2005, 299). Therefore, large operations usually involve foreign companies leasing land from indigenous communities, with the state bureaucracy acting as mediator and regulator. For example, the now defunct Solomon Islands Plantations Limited was 68 percent owned by the British Commonwealth Development Corporation, and 30 percent owned by the Solomon Islands government, with 2 percent allocated to customary landowners. The latter also received annually S1\$100 per hectare as land rental and S1\$500 per hectare as premium (Kabutaulaka 2001). Starting in the early 1980s, the government has allowed corporations to negotiate logging rights directly with customary landowners, with the state collecting tax duties for exports and licensing fees. In this industry, however, shared foreign–domestic business ventures did not emerge in the same way as in other industries (Frazer 1997). The economy's narrow base and dependence on primary resources and for-

eign capital have meant that its fortunes have fluctuated wildly along with global commodity markets.

As a result of this economic development model, the weakness of domestic bourgeoisie, and the occasional availability of foreign aid,⁸ the state apparatus has become the locus of economic and political power in Solomon Islands. At independence, power passed to an administrative and political elite largely committed to the continuation of this development pattern because it suited their interests and the interests of the bloated, unionized, and mostly urbanized public sector that provided their primary support base (Frazer 1997). This situation, however, does not explain the instability of politics in Solomon Islands, with about half of incumbent members of Parliament being replaced at almost every general election, nor the survival and legitimacy of the democratic process, including in the country's supposedly marginalized rural constituencies.⁹ If indeed state power existed entirely at the behest of a relatively small Honiara-based elite, then why, as Ian Frazer himself noted, did the influence of the bureaucracy actually weaken over time vis-à-vis the power of elected politicians? Intuitively, one would expect to see political power increasingly insulated from popular interference to protect the interests of bureaucratic and political elites. To explain this ostensibly contradictory situation, we must examine the role state-centered patronage networks played in sustaining this fragile social structure in the pre-crisis days. To understand how personalized patronage networks operate in Solomon Islands, let us look briefly at how they shape the formal political process.

Solomon Islands has a Westminster-style system of government. Election is based on the British "first past the post" principle, and governments are formed by coalitions that require an absolute majority. In the West this model has usually been associated with a stable two-party system; however, in Solomon Islands, coalitions have been characterized by instability and changing allegiances. It is not unknown for members of Parliament and even ministers to cross the floor and support the Opposition's no-confidence motions. Parties are mostly inactive between election campaigns and have flimsy organizational structures and little grassroots support in the provinces (Morgan 2005; Roughan 2004, 17). Many parliamentarians are independent and not affiliated with any political party. Some commentators, including former government minister Sam Alasia (1997, 2), have argued that political parties are weak in Solomon Islands because they are an imported institution that is incompatible with Melanesian culture, with its traditional focus on individual leadership. While there is no doubt

that the party concept is not indigenous, this factor is less significant than the near absence of clear class cleavages, which usually form the basis of left-right divisions. Furthermore, Solomon Islands society, unlike that of neighboring Fiji, is too fragmented for ethnicity to become useful as a source of mainstream political mobilization (Reilly 2004).

The arrival of independence before nationalism denied politicians in Solomon Islands the opportunity to use anticolonial sentiment as an instrument to fashion national parties such as the ones that typified sub-Saharan Africa's decolonization. Protests have remained local and so has political support. As a consequence, elections are usually dominated by local rather than national issues (Roughan 2004, 11). Even the anti-logging movement of the mid-1980s and early 1990s never became a nationwide phenomenon (Frazer 1997). Therefore, governments in Solomon Islands have been unable to maintain their cohesion through common purpose but have had to rely on patronage. Jeffrey Steeves has characterized this setup as a form of "unbounded politics," premised on the weaving together of fragile power bases that rely on personal allegiances (quoted in Fraenkel 2004, 38). Before RAMSI's arrival, the Solomon Islands business class was small and weak, and therefore the cash that maintained this system came from the state, foreign corporations, and later from Taiwan and China, and not so much from the domestic private sector. The result is a highly competitive political system in which reelection is far from guaranteed and governments seldom complete their four-year term.¹⁰

Thus, the patronage system and associated corruption in Solomon Islands do not constitute an aberration or deviation. They are not rooted in the preponderance of tradition and culture over legal-rational forms of governance. State-oriented patronage networks form the very foundation of the political system in Solomon Islands, because no other arrangement is able to sustain and integrate the state's many disparate societal forces. This is not a matter of traditional versus modern institutions, but one of political coalition making in the context of limited and unsustainable economic development, which is reliant on foreign-owned, resource-intensive, and migrant labor-dependent export industries, in a geographically and ethnically fragmented country. The relative success of organized plantation workers in securing improved working conditions early in the twentieth century (Bennett 2002, 4), and the ability of the trade union movement to safeguard members' rights in the 1980s and early 1990s (Prasad and Snell 2004) demonstrate that Solomon Islanders from different ethnic backgrounds are not "culturally" incapable of organizing and articulating

collective demands. The lack of cohesion in Solomon Islands politics is not merely a case of inadequately constructed colonial institutions; it is shaped to a significant extent by political and economic realities and the interests of the primary societal groups.

One of the defining characteristics of this governance structure has been the relatively small scale of personal wealth accumulation in the upper echelons of government and bureaucracy. While their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa have amassed legendary fortunes, Solomon Islander elites have usually used their access to state resources to distribute wealth through patronage networks. Indeed, political survival has largely been based on politicians' ability to provide benefits to their constituencies. While some have associated this with the Melanesian tradition of "Big-man" leadership (Turnbull 2002, 194), this pattern has more to do with a lack of real alternatives for sustaining political power.

Patronage was not strictly an informal practice in Solomon Islands. Until the 1997–1998 abolition of the area councils, it was institutionalized in three tiers of government. While the provincial governments and area councils had some independent political and administrative space, they were almost entirely reliant on the national government for funding (Frazer 1997; Scales and others 2002, 9). Patronage was also institutionalized through the Constituency Development Fund—an unaudited discretionary fund allocated to members of Parliament.¹¹

As we can see, state power in pre-conflict Solomon Islands fundamentally relied on the public sector, some landowner groups,¹² and a highly complex network of patronage penetrating as far as the village level, which mitigated the negative effects of highly uneven economic development. Because resources were sparse and the interests of stakeholders often contradictory, keeping this coalition together was indeed a difficult task. Ironically, while the constantly shifting and dynamic nature of state power had made policy making a very erratic business in pre-1998 Solomon Islands, the inability of any single ethnic group or class to dominate the state had ensured its integrity. Although Frazer was correct to argue that the main beneficiaries of this system were Honiara-based political and bureaucratic elites (1997), it was also the case that this arrangement survived because of its open-ended and volatile structure and because the interests that dominated it were sensitive to dissent and worked to co-opt potential threats.

Thus far I have shown that the modern–traditional binary is problematic for explaining political outcomes in Solomon Islands. Also problem-

atic, therefore, is the perception that low state capacity in Solomon Islands is a result of the weakness of modern institutions. As we have seen, state capacity is understood in the failed states literature as an external attribute measured against legal-rational good governance standards rather than social and political relationships. When the social and political context is considered, it is mostly in relation to the propensity of societal forces to enhance or undermine state capacity. Consequently, RAMSI has sought to identify and support sympathetic elements in Solomon Islands bureaucracy and civil society, such as Central Bank Governor Rick Hou and National Peace Council Chair Paul Tovua. In contrast, it has effectively marginalized groups deemed antagonistic to or unhelpful for governance reforms. For instance, although Nick Warner claimed that RAMSI saw consultations with the public sector unions as essential to economic recovery and reform, he weighed in to prevent negotiated public service pay increases from taking place in late 2003, much to the unions' chagrin (RAMSI 2004).

State capacity in Solomon Islands must be understood in relation to the political and social relationships that underpin state power and governance rather than in relation to an external "best practice" standard, because the latter tells us little about the dynamics of conflict inherent in the Solomon Islands political structure. While state capacity in the Weberian legal-rational sense has never been high in Solomon Islands, this does not explain the timing of the conflict or its development trajectory. Since capacity is in itself a socially constituted expression of political power, we must assess it in relation to the ability of groups and classes to promote their interests while avoiding conflict. Therefore, unlike Wainwright (2003) and Fullilove (2006), I argue that the 1998–2003 crisis does not represent the inherent shortcomings of the Solomon Islands patronage-based system of governance; it erupted because this system was disregarded and challenged. The crisis was not an outcome of arrested modernity or low state capacity, but of pressures on the capacity of the patronage system to quell tensions. This point is significant because RAMSI is attempting to relaunch some of the programs that were partly responsible for the emergence and escalation of the conflict. That said, there is no doubt that the pre-crisis patronage system did not provide a panacea to the many problems faced by Solomon Islands, and it definitely perpetuated and possibly accentuated uneven development between Honiara and the provinces as well as within the capital. However, in the social, economic, and political context of Solomon Islands, the patronage system offered a modicum of stabil-

ity because of its deep provincial outreach and redistributive functions. I now examine this contention against the two main phases of the crisis: the outbreak in 1998 of the ethnic conflict on Guadalcanal, and the postcoup period of lawlessness and criminality.

THE 1998–2003 CONFLICT: REFORMS, GUNS, AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

There is a near consensus in the literature that the 1998 Isatabu uprising had identifiable roots in the political economy (Kabutaulaka 2001; DFAT 2004). An Oxfam Community Aid Abroad report argues that although the conflict was initially understood as an ethnic one, debates over identity and ethnicity in Solomon Islands take place in a broader context of economic change affected by globalization, corruption, and the failure of a development model based on the exploitation of natural resources by large foreign-owned corporations (2003, 3). Kabutaulaka claimed that the problem of uneven development was more pronounced in Guadalcanal for a number of reasons: most of the large operations are located there; the Guadalcanal plains are the most fertile region in the country; there were more Malaitan migrants in Guadalcanal than in any other province; and the capital Honiara is itself located on alienated Guale land (2001).

There were some displays of sectarian resentment prior to 1998, most notably in 1988 when a large number of Guale (Guadalcanal Islanders) demonstrated in Honiara after multiple murders at nearby Mt Austin, reportedly perpetrated by Malaitan settlers. The Guale demanded, among other things, the establishment of a federal system of government, a more equitable distribution of the benefits from resource exploitation in Guadalcanal, and an immediate halt to internal migration (Fraenkel 2004, 189–196). The same demands were reiterated in a document presented to Prime Minister Ulufa'alu by the Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly on 4 February 1999 entitled “Demands by the Bona Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal” (see Fraenkel 2004, 197–203). The document also demanded that Honiara be relocated to another island and that the government pay compensation to Guadalcanal Province for the 1988 murders and for other crimes.

While the role of uneven development, unsustainable resource exploitation, and large-scale internal migration in the conflict is indisputable, aspects that have been overlooked by many commentators is leadership and agency. The fact of uneven development within and between states,

regions, classes, or ethnic groups cannot in itself account for sectarian violence. There are innumerable examples of countries and societies in which such divisions exist without evolving into a large-scale, violent conflict. Indeed, the very nature of capitalist development creates increasing wealth disparities. In the case of the Isatabu uprising, as in other conflicts, political leaders successfully appealed to real or imagined grievances in order to mobilize popular support. Such leadership agency was perhaps even more significant here, since the notion of a single Guale ethnic identity was very weak prior to the uprising and no overarching Guadalcanal-wide organizations existed aside from the provincial assembly.

Arguably, Guale resentment flared up in 1998, and not earlier, for two main reasons: the first and most significant was the Public Sector Reform Program (PSRP) of the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) government (Kabutaulaka 1999), and the second was the growing presence, since 1989, of thousands of Bougainvilleans in Guadalcanal (Kabutaulaka 2001). The latter is mostly useful for explaining the aggressive form assumed by the Guale resistance movement, rather than its emergence.

The Public Sector Reform Program met tough resistance from its inception in late 1997. As former Solomon Islands Central Bank Governor and longtime expatriate resident Tony Hughes pointed out, “the government persuaded itself that there was more official support for reform than actually existed, and underestimated the covert resistance to substantive change that was quickly established by vested interests throughout the public sector” (quoted in Fraenkel 2004, 41). Kabutaulaka noted that while the plan enjoyed strong support from international financial institutions and the aid community, its details were never widely discussed with key stakeholders and the majority of Solomon Islanders (1999). SIAC Prime Minister Ulufa‘alu argued, in a document entitled “Beneath Guadalcanal,” that the conflict was orchestrated for selfish reasons by vested interests that stood to lose from his necessary reforms (2000). This sentiment was not entirely unjustified. For example, former Police Commissioner Frank Short alleged that Guadalcanal provincial leaders, including Premier Ezekiel Alebua, planned the rural eviction campaign of Malaitans together with key IFM militants at a meeting held at the Tamea Resort as early as March 1998 (Fraenkel 2004, 64). It is difficult, however, to accept Ulufa‘alu’s claim that the entire uprising was orchestrated from above. After decades of interisland migration, illegal settlement, and grossly uneven development, the “Bona Fide” document was “not simply opportunistic demands [made] by a money-hungry elite,” but genuinely felt grievances (Fraenkel

2004, 50). Thus, although provincial leaders and opportunistic politicians played an essential part in igniting the flames, they quickly lost control of the wildfire. It seems that leaders like Alebua who incited the Guale to action at the early stages did not expect the turmoil to develop as far as it did (Fraenkel 2004, 65). Nevertheless, the involvement of provincial political leaders in the early stages of the uprising was instrumental—in the context of poor communication and little interaction between villages in Guadalcanal’s various regions—in galvanizing disparate pockets of discontent and resistance into one movement. As we have already seen, the same did not happen with the anti-logging movement of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In October 1997, the Public Sector Reform Program was presented as an emergency plan to resuscitate the country’s flagging economy (Ulufa’alu 2000). Logging exports were hit hard by the Asian crisis, and while the country’s rapidly depleting forests were given some respite, the economy plunged into deep recession. Real gross domestic product, for instance, fell by almost 2 percent. As a result, government debt ballooned, with arrears alone equaling approximately 11 percent of gross domestic product (Knapman and Saldanha 1999, 124). Ulufa’alu insisted that the plan was homegrown, but Kabutaulaka argued that it “was obvious . . . that many of the reform proposals were not entirely new. They reflected neoliberal and economic rationalist initiatives elsewhere, especially those propagated by international financial institutions and aid agencies” (1999, 443). And indeed, in order to attract donor funding, the government agreed to cut government expenditure, lay off 550 public servants, privatize state-owned enterprises, sell off government property, cancel all duty remissions and tax exemptions, and encourage private-sector investment. The plan aimed to bolster government finances by improving tax collection and cutting expenditure mainly by reducing government payroll. One of its first priorities was servicing loans. Hence, most of the August 1998 US\$25 million loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) was used to clear outstanding arrears (Knapman and Saldanha 1999).

While ADB economists Bruce Knapman and Cedric D Saldanha praised the high level of domestic ownership of the reforms (1999, 132), key stakeholders were conspicuously left out and the plan had a very narrow support base. To cut government expenditure, Ulufa’alu abolished the area councils in 1997 and replaced them with unelected ward officers (Scales and others 2002, 9). As Ian Scales pointed out, this weakened the government’s presence in the villages (2003, 3), but more significantly, it

cut off local leaders from patronage networks. Similarly, budget allocations to provincial governments were reduced. Although the government attempted to shore up the support of the public sector unions, planned large-scale redundancies sparked protests and debilitating strikes in June 1998 (Knapman and Saldanha 1999, 135). Furthermore, the logging industry and its many political allies, who were naturally opposed to increased government scrutiny of transactions and to the abolition of tax benefits, weighed in to undermine the program (Moore 2004, 103). The sale of the government's share of Solomon Islands Plantations Limited also proved contentious. Ulufa'alu announced that 20 percent would be sold to the Commonwealth Development Corporation, and 10 percent would be left with the Investment Corporation of Solomon Islands and eventually sold to interested locals (Kabutaulaka 1999). Landowners and the Guadalcanal Provincial Government expressed their dissatisfaction with this proposal and demanded that more shares be handed over directly to them (Moore 2004, 105). The Gold Ridge mine, which began operating in 1998, did make a significant contribution to government revenue, but it was shrouded in controversy, and disputes between the Australian owners and landowners' groups were common (Moore 2004, 85–88). Consequently, government plans to attract more mining operations and other large-scale, land-intensive operations to the country were unpopular in the provinces (McDonald 2003).

In sum, Ulufa'alu attempted the unfeasible task of simultaneously cutting off village-level leadership and other key interests, while seeking to attract support for far-reaching and radical reforms. The Public Sector Reform Program relied on a narrow and precarious coalition of some domestic business interests and several medium- and high-ranking bureaucrats along with strong external support from donors. It was in this context that provincial politicians began trying to undermine the government. Contrary to common perceptions of the inverted relationship between capacity and conflict, the reform program actually strengthened state capacity in the legal-rational sense. Ironically, improved capacity exacerbated rather than prevented conflict.

The second major challenge to stability in Solomon Islands came from ex-militants, gang leaders, and their politician collaborators, who sought to establish a heavily skewed and exploitative political order by force. Following the June 2000 coup, the country entered a period of lawlessness and thuggery that lasted until RAMSI's intervention. The signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement in October 2000 proved an important turning point:

While opportunism and criminal behavior were common on both sides since the beginning of the conflict, the cessation of hostilities and the formal dissolution of the militias made it increasingly untenable for ex-militants to claim they were pursuing anything other than self-interest.¹³

On assuming office after the coup, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare declared that his government believed in “justice before peace.” Thus he promised to use public money to compensate Solomon Islanders for what they had lost during the conflict (Fraenkel 2004, 95). In Melanesian custom, compensation in the form of pigs, shell money, and other gifts is an important peace-building measure. Offenders are traditionally not punished individually for crimes they have committed; rather, their entire community is held responsible and must compensate the victim’s community. However, as Clive Moore noted, “After the coup . . . these long-standing customs took an interesting turn and became a commercialised growth industry” (2004, 160). Some ex-militants and politicians began making exorbitant compensation claims, mostly against the state but also against businesses and communities. For example, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) *Four Corners* report showed a group of Malaitan thugs descend on an ethnically Malaitan fishing village in Guadalcanal and receive S1\$5,000 (US\$800) in compensation for a shooting incident that had only occurred because they attacked the village in the first place (ABC 2002).¹⁴ The deal was negotiated by Alex Bartlett, who at that time was a government minister and a former MEF leader. Moreover, Allan Kemakeza had to resign in 2001 from his deputy prime minister position because he had misappropriated funds from a Taiwanese loan. Snyder Rini, whose election as prime minister sparked the April 2006 riots, was also implicated in the misallocation of compensation funds (Moore 2004, 162). Between October 2000 and May 2001, the government paid S1\$18.82 million (US\$3.73 million) to 270 claimants, many of whom were ex-militants or politicians. Several ministers in the Sogavare and Kemakeza governments, like Bartlett, Daniel Fa’afunua, and Benjamin Una, were former MEF leaders, and others maintained close links with ex-militants.

The open conflict from 1998 to 2000 caused an economic meltdown in Solomon Islands, and the government became almost entirely reliant on logging and aid (IMF 2004, 40). Thus, the compensation feeding frenzy took place at a time Solomon Islands could least afford it. The budgetary situation was worsened by an increase in the public service salary component, up from S1\$166 million (US\$34.74 million) in 1999 to about S1\$180 million (US\$35.64 million) in 2000 and 2001 (IMF 2004, 41), because

of the mass recruitment of “special constables”—ex-militants—to the police.

Not only did the postcoup state provide very few political goods to the majority of Solomon Islanders, but it also brought them much misery and despair. Yet it is inaccurate to claim that it was dysfunctional. The postcoup state was an organized attempt to establish a political order to serve the interests of a small, armed minority (Fraenkel 2004, 145). Nevertheless, because of its very narrow support bases, it was always going to be a highly unstable arrangement, even by Solomon Islands standards. While ex-militants were remarkably adept, through cooptation and intimidation, at creating networks that spanned some parts of the public service and the political system, they exerted little effort to create wider consensus or include more interests in the new system of patronage. This explains why, unlike most international commentators, many Solomon Islander observers preferred to see the crisis as one of leadership rather than the economy or law and order (Kabutaulaka 2005; Sanga 2003, 5; Roughan 2003). Indeed, some past national leaders—like Solomon Mamaloni who, as John Moffat Fugui noted (2001), was hugely popular in Solomon Islands—were also involved in corrupt activities (Moore 2004). They had, however, paid more attention to the requirements of coalition building.

As we have seen, the political cohesion of Solomon Islands has relied largely on the inability of any single group to seize state power. Similarly, the country’s democratic system of government has been sustained by this power vacuum—there is just no other workable power-sharing solution. The MEF militants who deposed Ulufa’alu were aware of this fact, and it is telling that they did not seek to take over the state directly or change the constitution. Despite some irregularities, the facade of normalcy and procedure was maintained (Fraenkel 2004, 93). The ransacking of state coffers was done indirectly, under the guise of customary compensation claims, using formal government procedures. Jon Fraenkel called it “the instrumentalisation of disorder” (2004, 139).¹⁵

Nevertheless, the highly exploitative and exclusive nature of the postcoup patronage networks made them unsustainable, particularly considering the harsh economic realities. These networks relied on brute strength and not real support bases. Consequently, public resentment and discontent were only a matter of time. While some were riding the compensation “gravy train,” most public servants went unpaid for months, funding to services in the provinces almost ceased, and communities, particularly on Guadalcanal and Malaita, suffered from the deterioration in law and

order as well as the financial burden of bogus compensation claims (Moore 2004). The emergence of the Civil Society Network in early 2001 demonstrated the depth and pervasiveness of disaffection. It brought together the hitherto unlikely coalition of the churches, the trade unions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Chamber of Commerce, and women's groups (Prasad and Snell 2004, 276).

Starting in late 2002, resentment began to surface. In September, the police chased the previously untouchable Jimmy "Rasta" out of Honiara to Malaita. Later that year about four hundred "special constables" were successfully decommissioned by a United Nations program, and cracks began appearing in the cozy relationship between politicians and ex-militants (Fraenkel 2004, 152–153). When the last portion of a Taiwanese Export-Import Bank (EXIM) loan was exhausted in December 2002 and the state's reserves finally emptied, politicians started distancing themselves from arrangements that were no longer useful. For example, Kemakeza, who had defined himself as a "friend of the militants" in December 2001 (Fraenkel 2004, 139), started shopping around for foreign assistance, because he knew that the police would not be able to challenge the militants directly. At the same time, many ex-militants, who realized the tide was turning, started talking publicly about their mutually beneficial ties with corrupt politicians and senior public servants (Fraenkel 2004, 153). Therefore, RAMSI was seen by the government and most Solomon Islanders first and foremost as a "circuit breaker" to quickly disarm the former militants. The insistence on a comprehensive intervention with a significant governance reforms component was added later as a condition by Australian officials, not least because of the categorization of Solomon Islands as a failing state in Australian foreign policymaking circles.

To summarize, the two stages of the crisis carry an important lesson about governance and conflict in Solomon Islands. Crucially, they must be understood as irregularities; otherwise, it is difficult to explain why the conflict did not take place earlier. This understanding is vastly different from RAMSI's approach, which is based on the view that the political system in Solomon Islands in its entirety constitutes an aberration from "proper" forms of governance. The most important implication of this alternate perspective for RAMSI is that while there is real support in Solomon Islands for an external "circuit breaker" to get rid of the ex-militants and their associates, there is no similar backing for a comprehensive overhaul of governance. In fact, RAMSI's agenda exacerbates the potential for conflict, for two reasons: First, the poverty-reduction strategies promoted

by RAMSI and other donors are based on the supposed “trickle-down” effect of improved economic growth through export-oriented, market-driven reform. The measures pursued to attract investors actually increase poverty, at least in the medium term, because like the 1997 Public Sector Reform Program, they stipulate severe cuts in government spending and public sector redundancies, and apply pressure on the customary land-ownership system (Barr 2004). Second, completely dismantling patronage networks is dangerous because there are currently no societal forces in Solomon Islands able to provide national leadership. Arguably, the small bureaucratic, business, and NGO elites that benefit from RAMSI’s involvement will only be able to sustain their position after the mission’s departure if they engage in the painstaking and unstable coalition building that was supposed to end.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE APRIL 2006 RIOTS

At the time of this writing, violent protests in Honiara have shocked the unstable truce that has existed in Solomon Islands since RAMSI’s arrival. Following the election of Kemakeza’s former deputy Snyder Rini as prime minister, thousands of Solomon Islanders took to the streets, causing total devastation to the once thriving Chinese precinct. While the riots came as a shock to many Australians and international observers, there had been earlier warning signs that RAMSI had failed to reshape politics in Solomon Islands as it had set out to do. For example, Labour Party leader Joses Tuhanuku, who ended up losing his Rennell-Bellona parliamentary seat, said before the elections that “dirty money” and “backroom chats” would feature heavily when members of Parliament voted for prime minister. He also accused Kemakeza and other leaders of colluding with Taiwan to fund selected candidates and bribe members to ensure Kemakeza’s reelection (*The Age* 2006). Indeed, many of the protesters accused Rini, a close associate of Kemakeza, of using Chinese and Taiwanese money to bribe his way into office (Walters 2006).

Almost overnight the near euphoria surrounding RAMSI in Australian policy-making circles dissipated and was replaced with a sense of uncertainty. The Australian government reacted by dispatching a large military contingent to bring calm back to the burning streets of Honiara. However, military deployment is no real solution to the deep-seated problems that underlie the riots.

What the riots signify is the growing disaffection of many Solomon

Islanders with their marginalization from important political and economic processes. The protests also demonstrated resentment of the increasing clout in Honiara of a small and mostly Chinese business class who have benefited from RAMSI contracts and the presence of aid workers and other foreign personnel in the country, as well as from lucrative ties with East and Southeast Asian corporations (Moore 2006). However, like the ex-militants during the conflict, while this Honiara-based bourgeoisie is capable of influencing politicians, it is much less interested in creating wide support bases with real provincial outreach. As wealth disparities grow under RAMSI's pro-market governance reforms, the already frail connection between Honiara and the provinces is weakening even further.

RAMSI's work has been shaped by the notion that the conflict in Solomon Islands was the consequence of poor governance and low state capacity stemming from the weakness of the modern state. Indeed, this is the dominant theme of the failed states literature. However, as we have seen, conflict in Solomon Islands, as elsewhere, should not be understood in relation to the absence of universally valid governance institutions, but rather in relation to the actual political, social, and economic conditions in the country. Because patronage networks have acted to ameliorate tensions emanating from a pattern of highly uneven economic development, to undermine them, as RAMSI does, is potentially dangerous. A peaceful future for Solomon Islands can be realized if the country's political, bureaucratic, and business leaders manage to assemble stable coalitions of interest. RAMSI impedes the development of such coalitions by imposing conditions that are detrimental to their formulation and by promoting certain interests that neither enjoy wide bases of support nor demonstrate any inclination to cultivate them.

* * *

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Notes

1 Starting on 18 April 2006 after the election of Snyder Rini as prime minister, thousands of Solomon Islanders rioted over two nights in central Honiara. In the aftermath, the city's Chinatown—its commercial hub—lay in ruins. Ethnic Chi-

nese were the main target of rioters, partly because of allegations that Taiwanese and Chinese money had facilitated Rini's victory (Walters and Hart 2006). In response Australian troops from Townsville were sent to stop the violence and restore calm to Honiara.

2 The annual population growth rate is approximately 3 percent; it is now estimated it would take Solomon Islands almost thirty years of average 4.5 percent annual growth just to reach pre-conflict per capita gross domestic product (Fullilove 2006, 10).

3 In this work I focus on the concept of the failed state and its limitations for explaining the crisis in Solomon Islands. Therefore, the scope of this article does not allow for an analysis that aims to situate RAMSI, as well as its different and sometimes conflicting components, in the context of Australian domestic politics, the historical relationship between Australia and the Pacific Island states, and the changing framings of the Pacific within Australian policy-making circles. Some of these important issues have been examined in Fry 1997, McDougall 2002, and Kabutaulaka 2005.

4 As I illustrate later, this is precisely what happened in Solomon Islands in 1997–1998 when the Ulufa'alu SIAC government attempted, in response to pressures from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), to implement a wide-ranging public sector reform program (PSRP).

5 In this sense, see Fukuyama's "Denmark" metaphor (2005, 30), which refers not to the real Scandinavian kingdom but to Denmark as a generic "developed country with well-functioning state institutions."

6 As Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz demonstrated (2004), even the literature's fundamental contention that legal-rational governance structures are necessarily better suited than other arrangements to promote sustained economic development is contestable. In some cases, as in Indonesia, economic development has been facilitated by coalitions of interests representing premodern or oligarchic politics, rather than by Weberian legal-rational governance.

7 Nowhere is this more evident than in the contentious issue of post-conflict compensation.

8 The main donors, including Australia, only started attaching conditions to their aid in the mid-1990s in response to reckless logging practices (Hughes 2003).

9 Elise Huffer has demonstrated that voting rates in the Pacific have usually been higher than in most Western countries that do not practice compulsory voting (2005).

10 Yash Ghai pointed out a similar pattern in Papua New Guinea (1997).

11 This fund has not been available since June 2000 due to lack of funding (Scales and others 2002, 9).

12 Although leasing customary land to multinational corporations was a very divisive issue in many communities, corporations were adept at persuading and

bribing local leaders (Frazer 1997). For an illuminating analysis of the implications of logging on local communities in Solomon Islands, see Hviding and Bayliss-Smith 2000.

13 It did not stop notorious ex-militants like Jimmy “Rasta” from claiming they had to hold on to their weapons because Harold Keke refused to sign the Townsville Peace Agreement (Fraenkel 2004, 141).

14 Later, gang leader Jimmy “Rasta” extorted a further S1\$60,000 (US\$9,600) from the government in compensation for the same offense. The money was deducted from the village’s schooling allowance (Fraenkel 2004, 145).

15 The fact that most compensation claims were directed at the state, even though the crimes had been committed by the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force, is in itself an example of the central role of the state in organizing and sustaining patronage networks in Solomon Islands. The term “the instrumentalization of disorder” was first used by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999).

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Abstract

While the debate that has followed the intervention by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has centered on the suitability of the failed state label to Solomon Islands, I argue that this debate is misdirected because the concept of state failure itself is accepted uncritically. Examining what is meant by state failure is crucial, because (a) it has assumed an almost commonsensical mantle, which obscures its particular political and ideological underpinnings;

and (b) it has considerable conceptual limitations that render it a problematic framework for explaining the roots and possible trajectories of the conflict in Solomon Islands. State failure is essentially a descriptive category with limited explanatory capacity, grounded in a depoliticized and ahistorical theorization of institutions, state, and society. At its core is an unhelpful preoccupation with state capacity as measured against a hypothetical legal-rational good-governance model. Conflicts are understood in this framework as the result of poor governance or recalcitrant social forces. RAMSI, consequently, has sought to strengthen the institutional capacity of Solomon Islands as the key to conflict resolution as well as a preventative long-term peace-building initiative. In contrast, I argue that unless we develop a clearer understanding of the causes and dynamics of conflict, RAMSI's state-building approach is likely to exacerbate rather than alleviate tensions in Solomon Islands. This approach involves a shift in emphasis away from the current fixation on institutional capacity audits associated with the failed state concept, toward a more constructive theorization of the historically contingent relationship between changing patterns of economic development and social conflict.

KEYWORDS: Solomon Islands, failed state, RAMSI, state capacity, conflict, governance, patronage