

State-building and State Formation in the Western Pacific

Solomon Islands in transition?

Edited by
Matthew G. Allen and Sinclair Dinnen



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This book provides a rigorous and cross-disciplinary analysis of this Melanesian nation at a critical juncture in its post-colonial and post-conflict history, with contributions from leading scholars of Solomon Islands. The notion of ‘transition’ as used to describe the recent drawdown of the decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides a departure point for considering other transformations – social, political and economic – under way in the archipelagic nation. Organised around a central tension between change and continuity, two of the book’s key themes are the contested narratives of changing state–society relations and the changing social relations around land and natural resources engendered by ongoing processes of globalisation and urbanisation. Drawing heuristically on RAMSI’s genesis in the ‘state-building moment’ that dominated international relations during the first decade of this century, this book also examines the critical distinction between ‘state-building’ and ‘state formation’ in the Solomon Islands context. It engages with global scholarly and policy debates on issues such as peacebuilding, state-building, legal pluralism, hybrid governance, globalisation, urbanisation and the governance of natural resources. These themes resonate well beyond Solomon Islands and Melanesia, and this book will be of interest to a wide range of students, scholars and development practitioners. This book was previously published as a special issue of *The Journal of Pacific History*.

Matthew G. Allen is a Fellow at The Australian National University. A human geographer who has worked extensively across post-colonial Melanesia, he is the author of *Greed and Grievance: Ex-militants’ perspectives on the Conflict in Solomon Islands* (2013).

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Solomon Islands in Transition?

MATTHEW G. ALLEN AND SINCLAIR DINNEN

ABSTRACT

The notion of ‘transition’ as used to describe the recent drawdown of the decade-long Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides an obvious departure point for considering what other transformations – social, political and economic – are under way in the archipelagic nation. Yet the contributions to this special issue collectively reject the teleological language of transition and transformation deployed by many development actors in favour of a more nuanced and historically informed understanding of the central dialect between change and continuity, with change in Solomon Islands occurring slowly and in distinctly non-linear ways. This dialectic is traced and interrogated in various ways by the contributors to this issue. One broad theme concerns the contested narratives of changing state–society relations and, in particular, those between the central government and the rural localities where most Solomon Islanders continue to reside. Another is the changing social relations around land and natural resources engendered by ongoing processes of globalisation and persistent patterns of demographic change, migration and urbanisation. These and other processes of historical change, including state formation and capital accumulation, are also shaped by the enduring realities of scale and distance integral to Solomon Islands archipelagic geography. In this essay we explore these themes of change and continuity in Solomon Islands, positioning the individual contributions within this larger trajectory of slow-paced and distinctly non-linear change. Drawing heuristically on RAMSI’s genesis in the state-building moment that dominated international relations during the first decade of this century, we also examine the distinction between ‘state-building’ and ‘state formation’ in the Solomon Islands context and, in doing so, contrast the tropes of state failure, weakness and fragility against narratives of resilience, tenacity, innovation and experimentation.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank the anonymous readers and reviewers of this paper for their insightful comments and suggestions and wish to acknowledge the excellent support provided by the editors of this journal. Matthew Allen acknowledges support provided under Australian Research Council fellowship DE140101206.

This volume had its genesis in a two-day workshop convened at the Australian National University in November 2013. The workshop was titled ‘Solomon Islands in transition’ (*without* a question mark). Its purpose was to take the occasion of the so-called ‘transition’ of the then ten-year-old Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) as an opportunity to consider and debate other types of transitions that had been taking place in Solomon Islands over recent decades. The discourse of RAMSI transition was narrow, technical and managerialist. It addressed the shift from one modality of external assistance to another, namely, from a multilateral peace- and state-building intervention to a more regular bilateral aid engagement. As convenors of the workshop, we were concerned to widen the frame and to shift the focus to Solomon Islands itself. In the workshop blurb, we wrote that the discourse of RAMSI transition ‘should not obscure the other significant transitions underway in Solomon Islands ... the many transformations occurring within Solomon Islands’ societies’.

Now we stand corrected. While forgiving the rhetorical licence afforded to a workshop description, participants were quick to challenge our transition framing. By lunchtime on the first day, a salient tension had emerged between change and continuity, a dialectic that deepened over the ensuing proceedings and has ultimately necessitated the addition of a question mark to the title of the present volume. RAMSI transition may have served us well as a point of departure, a moment around which to gather and debate. But collectively the contributions presented here reject the lexicon of transition and transformation. Instead they chronicle slow-paced and distinctly non-linear processes of change that have been in train in Solomon Islands for many decades. Foremost among these are the changing relationships between state and society, widely perceived, from the vantage point of the rural majority, as a gradual retreat of the central government from their everyday lives. Alongside this perceived retreat has occurred an expansion of clientelist institutions and a proliferation of alternative, non-state structures and configurations of local-level governance. Another of the grinding processes documented here is the changing social relations around land and natural resources engendered by the ongoing encounter with globalisation. Several of the contributions also remind us of the Solomons’ enduring demographic conditions: high rates of population growth, a very young and mobile population, and the steady growth of peri-urban and urban areas, especially the capital Honiara.

Contouring these processes of change are what we might term immutable geographies. Tobias Haque, whose workshop paper has been published elsewhere, reminds us that the realities of scale and distance – which are compounded by Solomon Islands’ archipelagic geography – have long confounded the conventional models of economic growth and development.¹ They have also presented challenges to those seeking to govern, to the projection of the functional authority of the state to a

¹ Tobias Haque, ‘Economic transition in Solomon Islands’, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Discussion Paper 10 (2013).

widely dispersed rural population.² Several of the contributions here show us how the Solomons' immutable geographies have shaped, and continue to shape, state formation and capital accumulation in profound ways, just as they have done in other geographically challenging contexts both in Oceania and further afield.³

Returning to our central dialectic of change and continuity, the decade-long RAMSI intervention brought about far less change than its architects, proponents and early implementers had envisaged. Jon Fraenkel's paper in this volume demonstrates that RAMSI marked a distinctive period in the history of Solomon Islands but not a transformative one. Indeed, he questions whether the intervention should even be characterised as a state-building project, an issue that we take up below. Yet the broader point, upon which few would disagree, is that following the rapid restoration of law and order and financial stability, political and economic trends during the remainder of RAMSI's tenure were characterised by much more continuity than change. The notoriously unsustainable logging industry expanded, constituency development funds grew, the state continued its physical retreat from rural areas, voting behaviour during elections arguably became more parochial than ever before, and parliamentary politics continued to be characterised by instability and money politics and, in the case of the riots that followed the national election of April 2006, violence. All of this is a far cry from the massively ambitious and hubristic aspiration, pronounced by Australian Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Downer in early 2003, to 'radically re-engineer' and 'completely redesign the place' (quoted in Fraenkel this volume).

It has now become abundantly clear that RAMSI failed to realise these lofty state- and nation-building ambitions. Fraenkel argues that from its outset the mission differed from other multilateral state-building interventions, such as those in Iraq and Kosovo, in that it did not assume executive authority or attempt constitutional change. While these are important contrasts to draw, RAMSI nevertheless represented a stark departure from Australia's hitherto hands-off policy towards its Pacific Islands neighbours, which led some observers to cite it as the exemplar of Australia's 'new interventionism'.⁴ Moreover the shift in policy was in large part informed by contemporaneous developments at the global scale. The imperatives of the war on terror had brought about what Mark Duffield described as a securitisation of

²Graham Teskey, 'State-building and development: getting beyond capacity', in Rupert Jones-Parry (ed.), *Commonwealth Good Governance 2011/12: democracy, development and public administration* (London 2012), 44–48.

³ For Oceania, see Geoffrey Betram and Ray Watters, 'The MIRAB economy in South Pacific microstates', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 26:1 (1985), 497–512. For mainland Southeast Asia, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven 2009), 1–39. For the Horn of Africa, see Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: comparative lessons in authority and control* (Princeton 2000), 12–31.

⁴ Greg Fry and Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 'Political legitimacy and state-building intervention in the Pacific', in Greg Fry and Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka (eds), *Intervention and State-Building in the Pacific* (Manchester 2008), 1–36.

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development.⁵ Weak and failing states came to be seen not as benign objects of humanitarian and development assistance but as potent security threats to the West. This is precisely the framing that was applied in the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) report ‘Our failing neighbour’, released just prior to the deployment of RAMSI in July 2003, as well as that used by Australia’s political leaders to explain the deployment to their domestic audience.⁶ While RAMSI may have differed in its design and legal basis from other multilateral – mainly United Nations – state-building operations,⁷ it no doubt was conceived and executed during state-building’s apotheosis, and as we have argued elsewhere, it exhibited all the hallmarks of a classic ‘liberal peace’ intervention.⁸

Before moving on to expand on the key themes of the volume, we wish to note how RAMSI, specifically its genesis in the state-building moment, provides two further heuristic tensions that assist us in ordering our themes. First, we can foreground a distinction between ‘state-building’ as a linear, predictable and technical project and ‘state formation’ as a messy, organic and highly contingent historical process that plays out in multiple institutional spaces. Several of the contributions chronicle the latter, adding significantly to our understanding of how state formation is unfolding in Solomon Islands. Second, we can contrast the tropes of state failure, weakness and fragility against more positive narratives of resilience (or, as Debra McDougall prefers in her paper, ‘tenacity’), innovation and experimentation.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

The first presentation at the workshop, by Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, critiqued the very notion that Solomon Islands was, or had been, experiencing transitional or transformative change. His paper reminded us that trajectories of change and development are shaped by specific social and cultural contexts that defy the teleological tropes of modernisation and demographic transition. Subsequent presentations reinforced and

⁵ Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: the merging of development and security* (London 2001), 22–43.

⁶ Elaina Wainwright on behalf of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, ‘Our failing neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands’, June 2003, <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/our-failing-neighbour-australia-and-the-future-of-solomon-islands/solomons.pdf> (accessed 16 Sep. 2015). See also Alexander Downer, ‘Security in an unstable world’, Archive 1995 to 2012: Australian Ministers for Foreign Affairs, 26 June 2003, http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2003/030626_unstableworld.html (accessed 16 Sep. 2015).

⁷ Michael Fullilove on behalf of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, ‘The testament of Solomons: RAMSI and international state-building’, March 2006, http://www.loyyinstitute.org/files/pubfiles/Fullilove%2C_The_testament_web_version.pdf (accessed 16 Sep. 2015).

⁸ Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen, ‘The North down under: antinomies of conflict and intervention in Solomon Islands’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 10:3 (2010), 299–327; also see Michael J. Mazaar, ‘The rise and fall of the failed-state paradigm: requiem for a decade of distraction’, *Foreign Affairs*, 93:1 (2014), 113–21.

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affirmed the view that the most important changes taking place in Solomon Islands have, in fact, been in train for many decades and are, therefore, more representative of continuity than rapid transformational change. Three of these slow-paced processes of change are highlighted in the contributions to this volume, though others were raised and discussed at the workshop.⁹ Here we focus on changing relations between the political centre and rural communities, changing social relations engendered by globalisation and resource capitalism, and demographic change, mobility and urbanisation.

State–Society Relations

Several of the papers presented at the workshop addressed the theme of changing relations between central government and the rural communities in which most Solomon Islanders continue to reside. Some of these papers, or the research on which they are based, have been published elsewhere.¹⁰ In terms of the present volume, the papers by Akin, McDougall, Hviding and Monson address, in various ways, the changing relationships between state and society and, especially, between the centre and rural communities. This is a contested narrative. Widespread community perceptions of a gradual withdrawal of the postcolonial state in its service delivery guise must be set against the steady expansion of Member of Parliament (MP) constituency development funds that has occurred since their introduction in 1993.¹¹ These funds, the disbursement of which is highly discretionary, now exceed central government grants to the provinces by a factor of six.¹² For Craig and Porter, who presented at the workshop, the expansion and contemporary primacy of constituency funds is best interpreted as a reordering of political power that brings into question the narrative of a state in retreat. Rather than retreating,

⁹ See Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen, ‘Solomon Islands in transition: workshop report’, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Working Paper 2 (2013).

¹⁰ David Craig and Doug Porter, ‘Political settlement in Solomon Islands: a political economic basis for stability after RAMSI?’, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Working Paper 1 (2013); Matthew Allen, Sinclair Dinnen, Daniel Evans and Rebecca Monson, ‘Justice delivered locally: systems, challenges, and innovations in Solomon Islands’, World Bank research report, Aug. 2013, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2013/09/27/000356161_20130927130401/Rendered/PDF/812990WP0DL0Se0Box0379833B00PUBLIC0.pdf (accessed 16 Sep. 2015); Debra McDougall, ‘Sub-national governance in post-RAMSI Solomon Islands’, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Working Paper 3 (2014).

¹¹ On perceptions of the withdrawal of the state, see Allen et al., ‘Justice delivered locally’, 9–12; McDougall, ‘Sub-national governance’, 4–5. On constituency development funds, see Jon Fraenkel, ‘The atrophied state: a supply-side perspective on politician “slush funds” in western Melanesia’, in Ron Duncan (ed.) *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific* (Mandaluyong City 2011), 303–26.

¹² David Craig and Doug Porter, ‘Political settlement, transitions, and lasting peace in Solomon Islands? Some institutional perspectives’, unpublished paper (2013), 23.