

## Program 13: Contesting State Rule

**Conflict in Bougainville and coups in Fiji have gained international attention. But recent clashes in the Solomon Islands have challenged state rule. What are the roots of these conflicts and what can be done to strengthen relations between state and society?**

PEARSON VETUNA: Hello, I'm Pearson Vetuna from Radio Australia and it's 'Time to Talk'!

Today we bring you the final episode in our series on governance issues in the Pacific: 'Challenging the State'.

Barely a couple of weeks after the Fiji coup in May 2000, the international spotlight shifted to the Solomon Islands. Another democratically elected government was toppled by a civilian coup, supported by sections of the paramilitary police force.

BART BASIA: I think it was about a quarter to six. Somebody rang and told me that something was happening, that the Malaita Eagle Force was holding the Prime Minister hostage, that they've taken over the armoury. So I lined up a couple of songs and all of us went out, locked the gate and just stood there, and it was then that armed militants came and asked me to read that message.

VETUNA: Bart Basia, morning announcer with the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation recalling the June 2000 coup.

The coup was the culmination of years of tension on Guadalcanal, the main island, over long-standing land grievances. The dispute opposed indigenous people from Guadalcanal and migrant communities - mostly from neighbouring Malaita - settled on their land.

Angry about successive governments' inaction over land issues, armed groups of Guadalcanal youths took the matter into their own hands in 1998, and forced Malaitans off their land. Malaitans fought back and established their own armed militia. But they too grew impatient with the way their compensation claims were dealt with and they threw the government out.

Scores of people were injured or killed during the crisis.

An estimated 20,000 people - mostly Malaitans - fearing for their safety - fled rural Guadalcanal. Some had lived there all their lives.

AFU BILLY: We have relatives in Guadalcanal, my husband is adopted by Guadalcanal people so before '98 we were actually living in Kakabona, which is like Guadalcanal territory.

BERNARD GARO: The Kakabona area was under heavy fire from both sides and houses were

burnt and so that was when we learnt that our house that got burnt.

LUCIAN KOPE: Yes I'm a Malaitan and I married here and I stayed during the tension, I just stay here with the people.

AFU BILLY: For a lot of Solomon Island families all their lives were gone and people who have spent so much of their life savings on things like homes and they got burnt, that was very bitter experience for them.

NATHANIEL SUPA: We have lost almost everything and our economy's really collapsed.

VETUNA: Nathaniel Supa, secretary to the Peace Monitoring Council set up after the signing of the Townville Peace agreement, brokered by Australia in October 2000 between the warring parties.

The crisis not only devastated the Solomon Islands economy, it has also fractured the fragile unity of this multi-ethnic and multicultural nation, born in 1978 at independence from Great Britain.

It has reactivated a push for greater political and economic autonomy in several of the country's nine provinces.

More about statehood and federalism later. But first, why did this long brewing crisis flare up in 1998?

BERNARD GARO: Well, the general feeling when the tension started is that they feel that the government has left this issue bona fide demands of the people of Guadalcanal a little bit too late.

VETUNA: Bernard Garo has a mixed heritage. His mother is from Malaita, his father from Guadalcanal. He lives in Honiara. He's been working in trauma counselling with former Guadalcanal militants.

BERNARD GARO: If those issues could have been addressed earlier the tension could not have gone this far. But they feel that the government has not addressed the issues fully and they feel that the government is putting so much emphasis in other areas, rather than looking at addressing the main issues and that is why the ethnic tension has got out of hand.

VETUNA: But there is more to this conflict than simply just 'ethnic rivalries' between the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita. The crisis has also lots to do with unequal economic development, inefficient government structures, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and unfair distribution of benefits - all symptoms of a governance crisis!

Global factors aggravated an already difficult situation: the Asian financial crisis in '97-'98 led to the collapse of commodity export prices. This had a severe impact on the Solomon Islands logging industry, the nation's main foreign exchange earner.

To cut costs the government introduced a restructuring program. Money got short at community level and frustrations grew.

In Guadalcanal resentment grew against residents from Malaita. They were seen as taking all the jobs, all the businesses and the land.

Concerns over the loss of traditional land in Guadalcanal and the ever-growing number of outsiders existed long before independence. Bernard Garo:

**BERNARD GARO:** During the colonial days they didn't see this problem. What their focus was on was expansion of the British empire, influence and rule, and I think they have missed out on very important issues like migration, because for Melanesia land is mother for them and I feel that was the part that English never taking into account of. They introduced a labour force on plantations in many islands without considering the consequences and the impact it has on the social community also, and the social structure within those areas. And a good example of it is here at home in Guadalcanal where we have experienced this ethnic tension now.

**VETUNA:** Guadalcanal was the scene of heavy fighting between United States and Japanese forces during World War Two. Honiara was turned into an American military base. After the war, the British colonial authorities relocated the capital from Tulagi (in what is now Central Province), to Honiara.

Many hard-working migrants from the under-resourced and over-populated island of Malaita moved to Guadalcanal during that period.

Over time, Malaitans became the driving-force in the business and government sectors.

**BERNARD GARO:** The people from Malaita moved over here because of opportunities that they saw that was introduced by the colonial British government, but little did they realise that in the end it's going to backfire because the people on Guadalcanal feel that their resources and their land has been abused by outsiders.

**VETUNA:** Land has always been and still is a most sensitive and explosive issue in Melanesia.

It led to a ten-year civil war in Bougainville. Land is also an unresolved issue in Fiji and it came up during the coups. It has the same emotive resonance in the Solomon Islands.

**SIR PETER KENILOREA:** At this point in time people are so fearful of anything that might alienate themselves from their land.

**VETUNA:** Sir Peter Kenilorea, Solomon Islands' first Prime Minister.

**SIR PETER KENILOREA:** Parting with your tribal land and modern dealings of leases and all that sort of thing means nothing to our people. They might allow you to the use of the land but they say they still own the land. Land gives them life and freedom as a matter of fact and a sense of belonging and a sense of identity that they do have something. Whether or not it is productive it doesn't matter too much to them as long as they say that I've got a piece of land.

**VETUNA:** Concerned with the ever-growing encroachment on their land, Guadalcanal people filed their first land grievances at independence in 1978. Ten years later, they reiterated their demands for the return of alienated or illegally acquired land by Malaitan residents. The government was then led then by a Prime Minister from Guadalcanal, but their claims were never addressed.

In the meantime customary land was sold, in some cases to more than one person. This sometimes happened without the consent of other members of the tribe, most importantly the women who are custodians of the land in Guadalcanal matrilineal society.

These deals also angered younger generations left with a landless future. Bernard Garo:

**BERNARD GARO:** Here on Guadalcanal landownership is inherited through women, whereas in Malaita it's man and that has plagued a lot of things because you see while the women have power over ownership of the land and they give birth to the inheritants, but the man on Guadalcanal are the ones who decide over those ownerships and when they abuse the power that was given to them through ownership, I think that is one of the problems why this ethnic tension came out. Like nephews and nieces are seeing that their uncle is making use and selling their heritage and their future is being sold out and their birthright is being taken over by somebody not of their liking and their wish.

**VETUNA:** It's 'Time To Talk' on Radio Australia. Today: 'Challenging the State'.

Trade union leader David Tuhanku says many people now come to question the government system in place:

**DAVID TUHANKU:** The system just did not seem to be able to address those kind of grievances and there are many more. There have been a lot of questions raised about our system of electing our leaders, whether the mechanisms give us the best opportunity to elect the best people, whether we accommodate enough the traditional leadership qualities that people do have that could contribute to good governance in Solomon Islands. So I think that there is a sense that some of the causes of this conflict have been due to the failure of the system in general to provide the safeguards and to work in a way that accommodates the particular interests and needs of Solomon Islanders.

**VETUNA:** Sir Peter Kenilorea sees no problem with the system:

**SIR PETER KENILOREA:** I think the problem is the human element within the system. People are so diverse and people are so oriented to communal tribal existence - within my tribe there might not

be any real problem in Ariari, but if I look at the whole Malaita as a governing body some of the values I have in Ariari might not be fully accepted by my next door different tribes in other parts of Malaita. So trying to meet the middle line in terms of looking at the whole may not be acceptable by all of us. But in today's world the system is no problem, we've got to have a system to hold us together so that we might be able to live together and coexist. It's encouraging our people to appreciate and to have the spirit of understanding that transcends all our differences. So democracy is cumbersome and may be difficult to operate but I haven't yet to see a better alternative.

VETUNA: Union leader David Tuhanuku reckons there could be workable home grown alternatives.

DAVID TUHANUKU: I think everybody agreed that there is a need to come up with a system that's possibly starting with the fundamentals of the democratic system such as general elections. Coming up with some changes to the system to try and accommodate some positive aspects of our traditional style of governing or dealing with issues or dealing with people with some of the most useful and positive aspects or relevant aspects of the current democratic system. But I think that there has to be a proper process where they can actually look at finding an alternative or some alternative systems to what we've got at the moment.

VETUNA: As always in times of crisis, people tend to retreat behind the safety of ethnic or regional boundaries.

In some provinces, the crisis re-ignited discussions about Statehood under a Federal System. Three of the nine provinces favoured complete independence. The others want more control over their economic resources and favour greater autonomy within a federated Solomon Islands.

All want a review of the current power sharing arrangements. This will require a review of the Constitution.

Sir Peter Kenilorea who brought the nation together in 1978 warns against regionalist moves.

SIR PETER KENILOREA: My only hope and wish is the political leadership of Solomon Islands continue to have a perspective of ruling and governing a nation rather than getting oneself into parochial regionalistic kind of views and although I'm a Member of Parliament, although I am governing Solomon Islands, I am from this particular region. I think possibly education and maturity will help us get over that kind of regionalistic and myopic view of governance. In my view, our people are basically very good people you know, very peace loving, peaceful in a way, but they could get a wrong message by the political leadership if politicians talking regionally and talking divisional kind of language. That certainly would invite problems and difficulty within our already divided nation.

VETUNA: Whichever system emerges from this political and constitutional crisis, leadership remains a core issue.

Alice Pollard, leader of the Women for Peace Group.

ALICE POLLARD: Solomon Islands' motto says to lead is to serve, but where is that serving attitude? I think that is something that is missing and to go forward a leader in our context will really need to evaluate the type of leader that we have provided for our people. And characteristics like accountability, transparency, love and humility and the need of serving others first and listening to the needs of the people rather than my own would be the kind of leaders that we would require to really bring back unity for the nation.

VETUNA: Women during the crisis displayed strong leadership qualities. They worked together to restore peace and trust. But despite their crucial role in the peace process, no woman won a seat in the December 2001 general elections.

AFU BILLY: A lot of us assess the situation as when things are going well now the big boys seem to forget about the women and then we have to start from the beginning again and say look, we want to be heard, we want to be listened, involve us, involve us. We can be effective but if only the decision makers allow us to but we will always push to be heard.

VETUNA: Afu Billy, a leading woman activist in the Solomon Islands.

AFU BILLY: I think women's approach would be very simple, they operate according to the way they operate in their homes. They'd look at people's basic needs and they're good finance managers in their homes so I'm pretty sure that they'll be very thrifty with any money that gets into their hands. So I see those qualities as good qualities to enter into those kinds of leadership arenas.

PAUL KINI: We young people we don't want war again; we don't want no more guns.

SIR PETER KENILOREA: We're hearing it from the public, we're hearing it from individuals and church groups, and other reasonable thinking groups that return of the guns is central to not only peace but law and order in this country.

VETUNA: Today there is relative peace: an uneasy peace brokered by outsiders, but does that mean lasting reconciliation on the ground?

At election time in December 2001 five hundred high-powered weapons were still at large. The presence of guns remains a major obstacle to good governance.

SIR ALLEN KEMAKEZA: Those who are holding the arms at the moment are holding the arms on two reasons. One is building confidence, two they are there for their survival, because they can use guns to go and ask money or anything in the shops at the moment.

VETUNA: Sir Allen Kemakeza speaking just after his election as Prime Minister in December 2001.

SIR ALLEN KEMAKEZA: Law and order cannot be isolated from the disarmament program.

VETUNA: For Bernard Garo, part Malaitan, part Guadalcanalese, the number one priority is to restore trust between people - then things will move on.

BERNARD GARO: I feel that building up relationships would be a priority I see, because I feel if the government is thinking seriously in recovering Solomon Island economy then I think restoring that relationship that has been broken is the most important thing. Even if the government would want to put back Solomon Island on its feet again, who is the government? The people is the government!

VETUNA: That would be Democracy wouldn't it! But it's another long debate and it's time to go!

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I'm Pearson Vetuna and it's goodbye from all of us!

## **Program Participants:**

- Pearson Vetuna, Executive Producer of the Tok Pisin service at Radio Australia
- Bart Basia, radio announcer with the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) in Honiara
- Afu Billy, leading women's activist in Solomon Islands
- Bernard Garo, counselor with former militants on Guadalcanal
- Nathaniel Supa, secretary to the Peace Monitoring Council set up after the signing of the Townville Peace agreement in October 2000
- Sir Peter Kenilorea, the first Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands in 1978
- David Tuhanuku, trade union leader in the Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions (SICTU)
- Alice Pollard, NGO activist and leading member of the group Women for Peace
- Sir Allen Kemakeza, elected Prime Minister in December 2001