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A Weak State and the Solomon Islands Peace Process

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A Weak State and the Solomon Islands Peace Process

Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka

True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr

I looked at his blood as it dripped down my palms and onto the ground below. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

On a stretcher, wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth, was the body of a *wantok*, friend, and fellow Isatabu Freedom Movement leader. I stared at the motionless bundle. My emotions overtook me. I embraced the bundle and wept. This was the body of Selwyn Saki, another casualty of Solomon Islands social unrest.

Selo—as he was known by *wantoks* and friends—did not simply die; he was brutally murdered. He was kidnapped from his home east of Honiara on the afternoon of Saturday, 22 September 2001. His body was found the next day lying across the front seat of his truck, which had been pushed down a valley close to Mount Austin, behind Honiara. His throat was cut, his neck and spinal cord broken, and his body filled with bullet holes. He had been shot ten times. From the wounds, it was obvious that he had been tortured before being killed.

That Sunday afternoon, as I stood in the morgue and watched the body of my *wantok* being turned, poked, and examined by the doctor and his assistants, a wave of emotions engulfed me. I had gone to Honiara to make peace, not war. But, the sight of a *wantok* who had been brutally murdered was not easy to deal with.

That evening, when we took his body to his village, I knew there could be trouble; violence could erupt again. I felt an enormous responsibility on my shoulders. A few minutes after we arrived and the body was laid in his house, I was asked to say something to the crowd, many of whom were former IFM militants. In the midst of my anger, fears, and sorrow I heard myself saying that the only way forward is peace.

What saddens and angers me is that months after this incident, his killers have not been apprehended, even though many people have a fair idea of who they were. The investigation into his killing has stalled because those in positions of power have refused to let justice prevail.

It was partly because of this situation that my Guadalcanal *wantoks* took up arms in the first place. They no longer had faith in the state. If the Solomon Islands state is to survive, we must give people reasons to believe in it.

The Guadalcanal Uprising and the Coup

The Guadalcanal uprising started in late 1998¹ when some Guadalcanal men, claiming to represent the interests of the island's indigenous people, terrorized, intimidated, and chased settlers from other islands in areas around the national capital, Honiara. The group was first known by names such as the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army and the Isatabu Freedom Fighters. They later called themselves the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM).²

Their activities led to the eviction from Guadalcanal (especially the northern part of the island) of about twenty thousand settlers, most of whom were from the nearby island of Malaita. In the months that followed, tension grew, especially between remaining Malaitans and members of the Isatabu Freedom Movement. Soon, civilian Guadalcanal people in Honiara were being intimidated by a Malaita militant group that was developing in Honiara and initially called itself the Red Cobra. The name was later changed to the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF).

The government of the time, led by Bartholomew Ulufa'alu of the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC), made a number of attempts to resolve the conflict, beginning with a *kastom* feast held in Honiara on 23 May 1999. However, not all of those involved attended, and less than twenty-four hours afterward, violence erupted again on the Guadalcanal plains. The government also established a committee to look at moving from a provincial to a state system of government and requested assistance from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which brought in Major General Sitiveni Rabuka of Fiji to facilitate dialogue between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the national government. Two documents resulted: the Honiara Peace Accord of 28 June 1999, and the Panatina Agreement of 12 August 1999. The Malaita Eagle Force was not a party to these agreements.

On 5 June 2000, the Malaita Eagle Force staged a de facto coup, forced Prime Minister Ulufa'alu to resign, and deposed his government. Parliament met under duress and elected a new prime minister, Manasseh Sogavare, and government. Open confrontations between the two militant groups intensified in areas around Honiara. The Malaita Eagle Force took control of Honiara, while the Isatabu Freedom Movement had control over the rest of Guadalcanal. Despite numerous attempts at resolving the crisis, violent incidents and killings continued. Meanwhile, negotiations led to the cease-fire agreement of 2 August 2000, which was immediately violated. After further negotiations, another peace agreement was reached in Townsville,

Queensland on 15 October 2000. Euphoric peace celebrations consumed Honiara for the next week, but the crisis had not been resolved. The government was overwhelmed with demands for compensation it had no means of paying. Prominent civilians who questioned authority or attempted to discuss or report the issues were attacked and forced to leave Honiara. Fears of intimidation and reprisal silenced many who might otherwise have questioned the legitimacy of the events of June 2000.

The Weak State

In large part the violence continues because the government lacks the capacity to address the underlying issues. The relative weakness of the Solomon Islands state has been a major hindrance to the country's peace process. The state has been unable to maintain social control, ensure societal compliance with official laws, preserve stability and cohesion, encourage societal participation in state institutions, provide basic services, manage and control the national economy, and retain legitimacy. This weakness has been exacerbated by the crisis that began in late 1998, was followed on 5 June 2000 by the coup that replaced the legitimate government, and has contributed to the failure of the peace process.

In this paper I explore how the Solomon Islands state has had a negative impact on the peace process because of its weakness. Following the coup, the state was "hijacked" by individuals and groups who manipulated it to serve private interests. The locus of power was no longer vested in the state and its institutions, but was shifted to the hands of individuals and groups who used the state to legitimate the assertion of their interests. Therefore, the state could not act as an effective mediator in the peace process. The coup-makers forcibly controlled the state by intimidating its officials with guns they had acquired from the police.

First, I provide a background to the crisis by outlining some of the underlying issues. Then I go on to discuss the development of a civil society network, examining how an emphasis on community-based peace-building has been hindered by the continuing presence of arms and the intimidation of civilians by militants—often supported by undisciplined police officers who perceive civil society as a threat. Because of intimidation and threats, civilians have been prevented from contributing effectively to the peace process, despite their potential for facilitating conflict resolution.

In a situation where a democratic state is weak and the government is perceived as

illegitimate, it is important to democratize the peace process and involve as many parties as possible. It is essential to understand the different dynamics and changing character of the crisis, as the parties to the conflict and the issues involved have changed over the years. This conflict is no longer simply a matter of clashes between Guadalcanal and Malaita militants; rather, it is about disputes within Guadalcanal and Malaita and about issues of governance and state capacity.

Underlying Issues

The roots of the Solomon Islands crisis can be traced to the policies of the British colonial administration and, after independence, to the failure of successive governments to address important socioeconomic and political issues: nation-building, land ownership, large-scale resource development, the distribution of development benefits, urban growth, internal migration and settlements, inappropriate and inadequate education, and poor economic growth.³

A major issue that has confronted Solomon Islands since the colonial era is the construction of a nation-state and the development of a national consciousness among a group of islands whose people are culturally and ethnically diverse. Solomon Islands has a population of about 450,000 people who speak more than eighty-seven languages. The challenge of nation-building became clear at the time of independence (7 July 1978), when the Western Solomons threatened to secede and either form its own nation-state or join the neighboring island of Bougainville, which then was also demanding secession from Papua New Guinea (and was recently granted autonomy). The Western Breakaway Movement emerged partly because of the colonial administration's failure to meet demands for a system of government that would enable the masses to participate in decision-making and give them more power to determine the development of their natural resources and benefit from the outcomes (Premdas, Steeves, and Larmour 1984, 34–67).

The difficulty of forging a strong national consciousness was recognized by the country's pioneer leaders. Former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni once described the Solomons as a "nation conceived but never born" (1992, 14). Writing to commemorate the tenth anniversary of independence, he stated, "Solomon Islands or the Solomon Islands Community has never been a nation and will never be a nation and will never become one" (1992, 10). Anthropologist Christine Jourdan has also acknowledged that national consciousness is a new phenomenon:

[A]n urban-based elite, in government and administrative circles, is trying to promote a nationalist sentiment in the country. This projection of identity creates tensions between the so-called nation builders—those who want to promote the ideology of the nation—and the nation buildees—those who will be caught up in the nation-building process, willingly or not, but whose participation in, acceptance of, and, ideally, identification with the values of the budding nation will be essential to the legitimacy of the national enterprise. (1995, 134)

Nevertheless, Jourdan argued that among the younger generation of Solomon Islanders, especially in the urban areas, a new sense of national consciousness is in the making. She identified three factors: the education system; Pijin as a common language; and popular culture—as the “stepping stones” toward a national consciousness. These elements are crucial in conveying to citizens of Solomon Islands a sense of shared values and expectations, out of which a sense of common purpose in the future develops (Jourdan 1995, 134). That may be true. But for many Solomon Islanders national consciousness is often only skin deep: peel it off and you find a person with allegiances to a particular *wantok* or ethnic group; most people carry competing identities between their island and their country. Furthermore, while education has the potential to assist in the development of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), that potential is greatly hindered when each year more than 50 percent of class six students are pushed out of the school system.⁴ Education is not available to many people.

The relative weakness of national consciousness alone does not provide an adequate explanation for the Guadalcanal crisis; it does not show why violent tensions arose between groups of people who have been interacting with each other for more than a hundred years. It would be naive to conclude that the violence on Guadalcanal occurred simply because of ethnic differences and a weak national consciousness. Apart from issues of nationalism, the British left behind a group of islands largely undeveloped and an economy dependent almost entirely on the exploitation of natural resources by foreign multinational companies. Infrastructural development was concentrated around Honiara, the national capital, located on the northern coast of Guadalcanal and built out of what remained of a World War II US Air Force base.

Honiara is also where most of the formal employment opportunities have been concentrated. Statistics from 1971 to 1981 indicate that the distribution of

employment opportunities between provinces did not correlate with the distribution of population. The provinces of Santa Isabel, Makira-Ulawa, Temotu, and Malaita accounted for 49 percent of the country's population but only 15 percent of formal sector employment. Malaita alone had 31 percent of the national population and only 7 percent of the employment. Even more significant, this imbalance was worsening: in the same decade formal sector employment in those provinces scarcely increased. Moreover, in 1981 when overall employment increased, the levels of employment in both Malaita and Santa Isabel fell. Provinces that were already better provided with job opportunities, and generally had higher levels of development, experienced the most growth. Regional disparities in job opportunities since independence have worsened, leading to increasing migration to the employment centers (Connell 1983, 12).

Between 1978 and 1986 Malaita and Temotu provinces had a considerably higher proportion of people moving out than moving in. In stark contrast, Guadalcanal province was receiving a far greater percentage of movers than it sent. On the other hand, provinces such as Western, Isabel, Central, and Makira-Ulawa, as well as Honiara, had an approximately balanced proportion of people moving in and out (Chapman 1992, 82). The implications were important not only for population movement, but also for political and economic issues.

By the time of independence the country's domestic income generation was dependent almost entirely on agricultural development and the large-scale exploitation of natural resources: the oil palm plantation, copra, fisheries, and, more recently, logging. The issues of natural resource development and the distribution of accruing benefits became contentious in the decades after independence. In 1992 Mamaloni stated, "our natural resources are rapidly being depleted, not for the welfare of those who own them but to finance a government system that is far remote from the masses" (1992, 18). Ironically, much of the rapid exploitation of the country's forestry resources by Asian multinational companies took place in the 1980s and 1990s, when Mamaloni was prime minister for an extended period.

The oil palm plantation, established by Solomon Islands Plantations on the Guadalcanal plains in the 1970s, attracted workers and their families and relatives from all over the country. Some 1,478 hectares of land were acquired in 1971, but not until about three years later did the company begin operations, after including customary land boundaries and trustees in the agreement. For the indigenous landowners, the benefits from the plantation have been marginal. They own only a 2 percent share in

the company, compared to 68 percent owned by the British-registered Commonwealth Development Corporation and 30 percent owned by the Solomon Islands Government. In addition to shares in the company, landowners annually receive SI\$100 per hectare as land rental and SI\$500 per hectare as premium.

In past years, despite persistent efforts by landowning groups to increase their benefits, the government and the Commonwealth Development Corporation did not respond positively. Instead, they acquired more land over the years.

In 1997, when the Ulufa'alu government came to power, it proposed that as part of privatization under the structural adjustment program, the government would sell 20 percent of its 30 percent share to the Commonwealth Development Corporation. The remaining 10 percent of government shares would be sold to Solomon Islanders but managed by the Investment Corporation of Solomon Islands, the national government's investment agency. However, the Guadalcanal provincial government demanded that instead of selling its 20 percent share to the investment corporation, the national government should give it to the Guadalcanal provincial government. Pressed by the need for quick finance—prior to the crisis the plantation had contributed up to 20 percent of the country's \$585 million gross domestic product—the Ulufa'alu government did not respond positively.

Apart from such large-scale resource developments, many Guadalcanal people (predominantly males) from areas around Honiara were selling customary land to those from other provinces, even though Guadalcanal is a matrilineal society where females are regarded as the custodians of land. Many individuals were selling land without consulting other members of their line (*laen*, tribe), often causing arguments among landowners. Many of those who purchased land did so legitimately, through either customary procedures or legal means. Over the years, the sale of land has been resented by a younger generation of Guadalcanal people who view it as a sale of their birthright. Most members of the line, especially women and younger people, rarely benefit from such sales. Many land disputes arose within (former) landowning groups and between them and the new “owners.” Not surprisingly, members of the Isatabu Freedom Movement adopted as their motto, “Land Is Our Mother, Land Is Our life, Land Is Our Future” (IFM, 2 Mar 2000, 4).

Land has become an important issue for discussion since the Guadalcanal Province demanded a review of the Land and Titles Act, 50 percent in all revenue collected by the government from investments on Guadalcanal, rent for Honiara being established

on Guadalcanal, proper acquisition of Honiara's offshore area, and the return of all alienated land.⁵ Further, Andrew Te'e, one of the IFM leaders, expressed his attachment to the land of Guadalcanal in a series of three articles entitled "Land Is Sacred to Me" in *Isatabu Tavuli*:

[T]here is a trend occurring worldwide where many indigenous and original owners of land have been forced to shift away from "living" life, to just simply "surviving" it. This shift occurs when the original owners of land are marginalised in the name of "development" for the benefit of the nation-state. The shift is caused by government policies and legislation as well as the actions of huge corporate industries that do not respect the land and those who originally belong to it. (IFM, 2 March 2000)

The issues of land and natural resource development are not confined to Guadalcanal and the oil palm plantation, but are found throughout the Solomon Islands. In the Russell Islands in Central Islands Province, for example, the acquisition of land and the development of coconut plantations in the late 1800s by Levers Pacific—another British-registered company—contributed toward confrontations between the state and civil society. A dispute over land on Pavuvu Island emerged when Marving Brothers Timber, a Malaysian-registered logging company, began logging the island in 1985. Prior to that, Levers Pacific Timber, a subsidiary of Levers Pacific, had been involved in a violent confrontation in 1981 with landowners at Enoghae in northern New Georgia. The issues became especially pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s, when industries such as logging became prominent and involved collaboration between state officials and multinational (mostly Asian) logging companies (Bennett 2000).

During the same period, with the country's deteriorating economic situation, the government accumulated debts well beyond its ability to repay. By the end of 1997, for example, the government had accumulated SI\$1.2 billion in debt, more than double its 1998 budget (CBSI 1998), due partly to poor management practices that included uncontrolled spending and non-collection of revenue. Millions of dollars in potential government revenue were foregone through tax remissions on log exports; just from 1995 to 1997 the amount was \$109 million (ADB 1998).

In this period also, substantial fraud and theft by public servants occurred, while huge amounts of money were given to members of parliament through the Constituency Development Fund. In many cases this money was used as "handouts" to

gain and retain the political loyalty of people who, as a result, became more dependent than before. In consequence, a majority of the country's population suffered; a few became very rich at the expense of nation-wide development.

Another issue to come under serious discussion at the time of independence was the provincial system of government, which many people believed would be expensive and ineffective. Among other things, the discussions hinged on issues of power over the development of natural resources, the benefits from such development, and the desire to participate directly in decision-making processes. Many people proposed that a federal (state) system of government would be more appropriate for Solomon Islands, assuming that federalism would facilitate the devolution of power and the equitable distribution of development benefits. Proponents of the Western Breakaway Movement raised this issue, among others, and it surfaced again in 1987, when the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) was set up to reconsider the 1978 constitution. One of the committee's major recommendations was the establishment of a federal system of government (Mamaloni 1988). However, it was ignored by successive governments and most of the committee's recommendations were never implemented.

Other issues were raised by the 1987 CRC report. One of the most important related to the freedom of movement and settlement. The Solomon Islands Constitution guarantees every person the "freedom of movement [which] means the right to move freely throughout Solomon Islands, the right to reside in any part of Solomon Islands." However, the CRC report contained many expressions of the need to control the movement and settlement of people in Solomon Islands (Mamaloni 1988).

On Guadalcanal, issues of migration and settlement were compounded because of the rapid growth of Honiara and the expansion of squatter settlements in its vicinity. The people of Guadalcanal had long been concerned with the migration of other Solomon Islanders to their island. For instance, in February 1954 when touring as special lands commissioner in northeast Guadalcanal, Colin Allan noted in his diary that "the worst fear the Tasimboko people have is in regard to the immigration of Malaita people" (quoted in Chapman 1992, 94). Much later, in 1987, a man from Oa village on southeast Guadalcanal expressed similar sentiments when testifying before the Constitution Review Committee: "Freedom of movement should not include the freedom to settle in another language area without permission of customary landowners, or without respect for culture and customs of those who reside in that

language area” (Mamaloni 1988, 496).

Ten years after independence, the people of Guadalcanal could no longer contain their frustration. In 1988 many of them demonstrated after the multiple murders at Mt Austin, behind Honiara, and demanded, among other things, the establishment of a federal system of government and that “immediate steps be taken to reduce the pressure of internal migration.” Increasingly in the late 1980s and 1990s Honiara became a town that reflected the country’s national problems. In 1989, for example, a riot broke out in Honiara after confrontations between Malaita youths and those from Rennell and Bellona. Police records indicate that most of those involved were unemployed youth.

Another 1990s phenomenon that goes a long way to explain the Guadalcanal crisis was the in-migration of Bougainvilleans during that island’s ten-year war for independence from Papua New Guinea. Upwards of nine thousand Bougainvilleans fled to the Solomons, and a vast majority of them settled in Guadalcanal for long periods. This huge displacement of people occurred through most of the 1990s. Only recently have most of them begun to return to their own country. While living in Solomon Islands to obtain medical treatment, safety for their families, and to enjoy a bit of peace, they must have shared with Guadalcanal people (and others) how they had driven the hated “redskins” (PNG Highlanders) from their island. In the process, Bougainvilleans had also taken on Bougainville Copper, one of the world’s largest and richest mining companies, and completely routed their Panguna operations, rejecting the mine and all it represented.

With so many major political and economic issues unresolved, and the continuing failure of successive governments to educate and employ the country’s youth, the 1997 national election marked a turning point for Solomon Islands. For the first time in the country’s electoral history, voters dismissed more than half of their highest elected officers and selected two Chinese businessmen. In none of the three previous elections had so many parliamentarians lost their seats. The Mamaloni government, which had been in power for more than seven years, was soundly defeated. The election results sent a strong message to politicians that the people would no longer accept “business as usual.” They were demanding change, and quickly.

Attempts at Conflict Resolution

In the first of several attempts to resolve the conflict, the Ulufa‘alu government’s

Solomon Islands Alliance for Change party held a *kastom* feast in Honiara on 23 May 1999, bringing together some leaders and elders from Guadalcanal and Malaita. The rationale was that the “*kastom* way” was the most appropriate approach to settling the conflict. However, three major problems arose. First was the question of how to define the “*kastom* way” and who should define it. At the time, the term *kastom* was not clearly defined, and given the cultural diversity of the country the question of whose *kastom* should be used or given prominence was not considered. It was generally assumed that the “*kastom* way” involved the exchange of gifts: food crops, pigs, and shell money.

A second problem was the absence of IFM members from the feast. It was assumed that the Guadalcanal big men⁶ who attended the feast represented or could control the movement, which was not necessarily the case. Less than twenty-four hours after the feast, violence erupted again on the Guadalcanal plains.

Third, although the feast was symbolically important as the first step toward conflict resolution, it did not (and could not) address the issues raised by the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the bona fide demands of the Guadalcanal people, which were submitted to the central government in February 2000. Among other things, they included demands for compensation for Guadalcanal people who had been murdered, a review of land legislation, rent for the use of Honiara land as the national capital, the establishment of a federal system of government, and equitable distribution of revenues from large-scale natural resource developments in Guadalcanal.⁷

On the positive side, the SIAC government did establish a committee to review the existing system of provincial government and did prepare for the establishment of a federal system. A Draft Report on State Government was produced in July 2001, but at the time of writing the proposed State Government Bill had not been passed by parliament. A review of the constitution has been undertaken to ascertain the changes needed before the proposed state system is introduced.

As part of its attempt to resolve the crisis, the Solomon Islands government requested assistance from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which subsequently sponsored an unarmed police contingent from Fiji and Vanuatu to help rebuild confidence in the communities. It also appointed former Fijian prime minister and leader of Fiji's 1987 coups, Major General Sitiveni Rabuka, as a special envoy to facilitate negotiations. No sooner had Rabuka landed in Honiara than he infuriated Malaitans by stating that he understood the grievances of the Guadalcanal militants because “I

myself was once a militant like you.”⁸ Many Malaitans interpreted the statement to mean that Rabuka favored the Isatabu Freedom Movement. Furthermore, his background as the man who led the 1987 coups in Fiji did not give him a positive image.

Despite this initial setback, Rabuka managed to facilitate a dialogue between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the national government that produced two documents. The Honiara Peace Accord, signed on 28 June 1999, acknowledged the failure of successive governments to address the issues raised by the Guadalcanal people in their submissions of 1988 and committed the SIAC government to address those issues. However, it did not provide a strategy for implementation. The second document, signed on 12 August 1999, was the Panatina Agreement, which reiterated the government’s intention to implement the Honiara Peace Accord, highlighted the need for community policing, and demanded that militants lay down their arms and disband their “unlawful” organizations.

By mid-1999 some Malaitans, offended by the activities of the Isatabu Freedom Movement and frustrated by the government’s inability to resolve the conflict, had begun to organize their own militant group. The Malaita Eagle Force, as it became known, was not a party to the two agreements just mentioned, and their concerns were not addressed.

Consequently, on 5 June 2000, the Malaita Eagle Force, in collusion with Malaitans in the Royal Solomon Islands Police,⁹ took control of the police armory and staged a de facto coup, forcing prime minister Ulufa’alu to resign, and deposing his SIAC government. After a vote, under duress, by less than the entire parliament, Manasseh Sogavare from Choiseul province was sworn in as the MEF-sponsored prime minister. His government has been widely perceived as illegitimate.

In the following months, open confrontation between the two militant groups intensified in areas around Honiara, creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Armed with state weapons, the Malaita Eagle Force took control of Honiara. Businesses were threatened or forced to hand over supplies and other items at gunpoint, and vehicles were stolen or hijacked. The Isatabu Freedom Movement remained in control of the rest of Guadalcanal. By the end of 2000, more than one hundred people had been reported killed, though the number has not been independently verified because of the difficulty of obtaining accurate information.

More than a year later, Sogavare acknowledged continuing harassment of

government officers by armed civilians. Police officers were not only driving around in stolen vehicles but involved in such criminal activities as kidnapping and murder. The crisis has resulted in the militarization of society, as many former militants continue to possess or have access to rifles or home-made guns, which are used to demand compensation, to threaten state officials, to kill, and in other criminal activities. Disputes and killings within the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force went on, exacerbated by the availability of arms.

Despite frequent armed clashes, attempts to resolve the conflict continued. With assistance from the New Zealand and Australian governments, arrangements were made in mid-2000 to facilitate negotiations between the two militant groups, culminating on 2 August in the signing of a cease-fire agreement on board the Australian navy vessel, HMAS *Tobruk*. However, less than twenty-four hours later the agreement was violated when an MEF militant was shot and killed in a shootout near Tanavasa, west of Honiara.

Negotiations persisted, and eventually the parties were brought together in Townsville, where they signed the Townsville Peace Agreement on 15 October 2000. Three days afterward, members of the two warring parties met in Honiara and began what became nearly a week of “peace celebrations” that surprised many people. A foreign diplomat in Honiara described the scene:

The town has gone mad. Processions of vehicles, trucks, banners, all using their horns. The IFM from both east and west [Honiara] are in town in large numbers. Andrew Te'e and Rasta walked the length of town shaking hands with the people. Very joyous occasion. Beyond your imagination. The atmosphere has totally changed. I wish you could be here. . . . I did not think I would see this so soon. It all looks so genuine, and is so emotional. We are all very happy. (Personal communication, 20 Oct 2000)

The celebrations were short-lived. Within weeks, as the euphoria of “peace celebrations” disappeared, the reality of the crisis began to reemerge.

Although it managed to stop overt violence between the two militant groups, the Townsville Peace Agreement had numerous weaknesses. First, it assumed that the parties to the conflict were strong cohesive entities with a clear chain of command and therefore able to implement the requirements of the agreement. This was not entirely the case. After the agreement was signed, divisions emerged within the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement that gave a new dimension and character to

the crisis.

Second, the agreement attempted to address more issues than were within the power of the parties involved. For example, it stipulated that development projects be established on Guadalcanal and Malaita. These were issues of government policy and could not have been dictated or implemented by two militant organizations. The agreement should have concentrated on addressing the cessation of violence and hostility between the two parties.

Third, the issues of justice and accountability were ignored. Those who engaged in criminal activities during the crisis were not apprehended or held accountable in a meaningful way. Instead, they were given blanket amnesty and not even required to apologize to the nation. The signal was that committing a crime did not involve serious consequences. Justice was not seen as an important component of the peace process.

Fourth, participation in the Townsville Peace Agreement was limited to the two militant groups and the government. The issues discussed reflected only the interests of those three parties and did not necessarily represent the concerns of the entire country. Other members of the Solomon Islands community—churches, nongovernment organizations, women, and other civil society groups—were denied representation. Other weaknesses of the agreement are outlined in the Peace Monitoring Council's report on the review of implementation of the agreement.¹⁰

Implementation was difficult because of the weakness of the state. The machineries of government did not have the capacity to address a number of the issues, partly because state institutions had collapsed.

The Weak Solomon Islands State

The state in Solomon Islands has often been described as relatively weak. For example, Kabutaulaka and Dauvergne described the Solomon Islands state as “extraordinarily weak—that is, it lacks the capacity to impose uniform rules, construct and maintain effective state agencies, implement state rules, or manage natural resources and the national economy” (1997). These abilities and the nature of the relationship between state and other actors and forces in society are measures of a state's influence and control. Kabutaulaka and Dauvergne also noted that despite its limited capacity to implement national policies and provide basic services, the Solomon Islands state has continued to exist because of international assistance, low societal dependence on the state, and informal relationships that assist in providing services.

Here, the term *state* refers to the institution that claims monopoly over the territorial boundary of a nation-state and, ideally, should have a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence; it is also the institution that controls the public sector. This definition is adopted here because of its focus on violence and legitimacy, two issues that are currently important in the Solomon Islands. As a political entity, the state may usefully be conceptualized in four ways: organizational, functional, ethical, and international (Larmour 1996, 1).

As an organization, the state is often viewed as multifaceted, consisting of an executive, a legislature, a bureaucracy, courts, police, armed forces, and, when applicable, schools and public companies. Larmour noted that as an organization the state's strength or weakness is often determined by both internal and external factors and actors. Internally, state capacity is affected by its internal organization and the diverse and often competing interests between its various institutions. Externally, state capacity is measured by its ability to influence and resist the influence of other powerful social factors and actors. As an organization, the state is part of society, or what Migdal referred to as a "state-in-society" analysis.¹¹ The state exists and functions in relation to the rest of society.

In functional terms the state is often expected to perform the tasks described by Adam Smith as the "three duties of the sovereign": defense, policing, and the construction of public works that would be unprofitable for the private sector but of benefit to society. The state has the responsibility to defend citizens from both internal and external threats and to ensure that there is law and order in society—to develop and impose uniform rules and norms of behavior within the society. The state is also expected to build and maintain roads, bridges, airports, and other infrastructure that facilitates socioeconomic development.

As well, the state has an ethical responsibility. Because it claims monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, the state is expected to use that monopoly responsibly. It must be impartial in its treatment of citizens, especially in the implementation and enforcement of law and order.

The state relates to other states in international relations; this international role often gives legitimacy to small states (see Jackson 1990, 3–4). In examining a state's capacity, one must consider both the domestic and the international factors that influence it. As I discuss later, despite internal incoherence, a state may continue to exist only because of external support.

Within this context of conceptualizing the state, I examine the Solomon Islands state's contribution to the country's peace process. To contribute successfully, the state must be organized and able to function effectively. Social unrest occurs when the state is unable to control society.

In the Solomon Islands case, when members of the Isatabu Freedom Movement took up arms and began chasing and harassing settlers around Honiara, they were challenging the authority of the state, especially its claim of monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. Their persistent acts of violence and the inability of the police to deal with them served to demonstrate state weakness. It was the first time since independence in 1978 that the power of the state to maintain social control had been openly challenged. Although the weakness of the Solomon Islands state had already become apparent, no one had previously challenged its authority in such a violent manner.

The state's ability to respond effectively and efficiently was severely affected by a number of factors. It was not internally organized or prepared for such a crisis; the lack of expertise, experience, and resources was exacerbated by the divisions and competition between and within state institutions. A classic example was the division within the police force. During the crisis it was obvious that the police were divided along island and ethnic lines. Malaitan police officers collaborated with the Malaita Eagle Force; after a shootout between IFM and MEF militants at Koqulai, near Honiara, in March 2000, the retreating "MEF militants" left behind items that belonged to the police: a casualty stretcher, two pairs of camouflage trousers and two jackets, small containers of used medicine, and a military head bag labeled "PC 780 - Elijah Marite." It was later confirmed that PC 780 was a Malaitan police officer (*Daily Post*, 5 Mar 2000). Many Malaitan police officers colluded with the Malaita Eagle Force in planning and executing the coup, and during the coup the police force became an instrument of the Malaita Eagle Force to the extent that it was difficult to distinguish between the two groups. Likewise, evidence showed that Guadalcanal police officers assisted their *wantoks* in the Isatabu Freedom Movement, and during the height of the crisis some of them defected and joined the movement.

After the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement, the situation in the police did not change dramatically, partly because the agreement did not address the force's internal problems, especially the absence of discipline. Many officers who had joined one or other of the militant groups were not only reengaged—a requirement of the

agreement—but some were also promoted. The problem was exacerbated by the domination of the force, especially the top positions, by Malaitans, many of whom had participated in the overthrow. Further, the absence of the police commissioner (a New Zealander) at the time of the coup meant that his subordinates, some of whom were collaborating with MEF militants, took over the administration of the police. Lacking impartiality and discipline, the force was hijacked by individuals and groups who manipulated it to serve their own interests.

This situation was acknowledged by Prime Minister Sogavare on 4 October 2001, when he was reported to have “admitted that the government cannot make serious decisions because of the country’s law and order problem” (SIBC News, 4 Oct 2001). He was referring to the continuous harassment of government officers by armed civilians, especially with demands for compensation. Sogavare was quoted as saying that “the country cannot have a government running its operations smoothly when people continue to harass ministers, public servants and business people . . . Unless law and order is restored, Solomon Islands cannot address other areas of the government that need urgent attention” (SIBC News, 4 Oct 2001). Some of those involved in these criminal activities were police officers. For instance, in June 2001 some armed police officers, frustrated by delays in receiving their pay, went to the treasury department of the Ministry of Finance and threatened the employees there. As late as September 2001 police officers were driving around in stolen vehicles in Honiara and a special constable was alleged to have been involved in the kidnapping and brutal murder of former IFM leader Selwyn Saki the same month.

By late 2001 the Solomon Islands public was calling for the deployment of an armed outside police force to disarm criminal elements and assist in monitoring the December 2001 general election. However, Commissioner of Police Morton Siriheti opposed the idea, arguing that the police needed funds and that leadership within the police was already effective. In an attempt to regain public confidence in the police, an operation was launched in Honiara to combat crime. Australia refused to send in police officers; instead, they offered A\$3 million to help with police and peace monitoring work.¹² Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said that the extra Australian funding was designed to “help the elections take place in an environment conducive to a free and fair outcome” (SMH, 6 Nov 2001).

Such responses from Australia and other foreign governments did not contribute to resolving the Solomon Islands crisis. The problem with the police is not simply the

lack of finance, but the poor institutional culture. The force is unable to function coherently because of divisions along ethnic lines, self-interest, and the failure to discipline police officers who were involved in criminal activities. Money will not resolve these problems. Putting more money into the police might well enhance some officers' involvement in criminal activities and strengthen the position of those undisciplined officers who have been promoted to senior levels. Pouring money into such an institution is like putting a bandaid on a tropical ulcer. Moreover, any attempt to restore public confidence must begin with the removal of the criminal element from the police force. Institutional change is necessary, in terms of both the structure of the force and the individuals in it.

Second, the state's capacity to participate effectively in the peace process was greatly diminished as individuals and non-state organizations hijacked its institutions and structures and used it as an instrument to serve their personal and non-state interests. For instance, during the crisis many individuals dipped into the state coffers. Andrew Nori, in his various capacities as leader, spokesperson, legal adviser, and mentor of the Malaita Eagle Force made tremendous financial gains from the crisis. His company, Bridges Lawyers, was paid more than SI\$500,000 in legal fees by the government for his representation of the Malaita Eagle Force, a non-state organization.¹³ Although the Malaita Eagle Force had been declared an illegal organization for part of the time when Nori was providing legal advice, he was still paid from state funds.

In another example, in July 2001 the then minister for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace and deputy prime minister, Allan Kemakeza, signed for himself a check worth SI\$800,000, nominally for compensation. His permanent secretary, Lucian Ki'i, received SI\$700,000 (*Solomon Star*, 15 July 2001). Both were sacked by the prime minister when this scandal was exposed.

In other cases, the state has been blackmailed by way of outrageous compensation demands. For example, in September 2000 IFM leader Harold Keke held a Solomon Airlines plane and its pilot hostage at Babanakira, on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, and demanded SI\$2.5 million in compensation. He was eventually paid SI\$200,000 to release the pilot, but the plane was later destroyed. Following the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement, the government was overwhelmed with compensation demands that it could scarcely afford. (These demands will be discussed in some detail later).

During the crisis, the executive arm of government, the cabinet, was hijacked to serve the interests of particular individuals. Following the coup, political parties acting in caucus effectively took power away from the cabinet. Many important decisions were made by this caucus, sometimes overturning decisions made by the cabinet, even though caucus membership included many unelected people. The caucus was chaired and effectively controlled by Charles Dausabea, who operated as the de facto prime minister and was so perceived by many people. Manasseh Sogavare himself admitted that he had lost control of the government and that it had become an institution that served the interests of particular individuals.¹⁴

Third, the state's ability to contribute effectively to the peace process has been severely weakened by the country's deteriorating economy. As the conflict intensified, the economy declined to the verge of bankruptcy, a process exacerbated by the closure of major industries such as the oil palm plantation and Gold Ridge mine on Guadalcanal, and the Solomon Taiyo fish cannery at Noro, Western Province. Investors and potential investors were reluctant to put money into the Solomons. In March 2001 the governor of the Central Bank of Solomon Islands was reported as saying that "the country is just weeks away from economic collapse."¹⁵ The Commonwealth Development Company withdrew its investments (60 percent share) in Solomon Islands Plantations, the company that owns the oil palm plantation on the Guadalcanal plains and had contributed about 20 percent of the country's domestic revenue prior to the crisis.

By mid-2001, external reserves had declined dramatically. The Central Bank of Solomon Islands recorded:

Since the events of June 5 last year [2000], the external reserves were falling at an alarming rate—\$5 million per week—since mid 2000 until the first quarter of this year [2001]: the result of low exports, continuation in imports and some capital transfer At the end of June 2001, the reserves were at \$114.0 million compared with about \$151.3 million at the end of December 2000, a fall of \$37.3 million. (Hou 2001, 5)

The faltering economy was further exacerbated by the increasing demands for compensation from the state, the government having created a "compensation culture" that it was unable to sustain. After assuming office, the Sogavare government established a Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace with plans to resolve the crisis by paying "compensation where appropriate."¹⁶ By mid 2001, the

government had spent about SI\$40 million in compensation payments,¹⁷ and demands continued to come in. In some cases, officers of the Treasury Division of the Ministry of Finance were threatened by armed men, who forced them to pay compensation. In July 2001, sources in the Ministry of Finance released a list of compensation payments made from October 2000 to April 2001. During the review of the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement in September 2001, Deputy Prime Minister William Haomae admitted that the government's system of assessing and paying compensation was faulty and vulnerable to manipulation. He also admitted that some compensation payments were made on false claims.

In retrospect, the decision to pay compensation and the manner in which it was done was counterproductive and worked against the long-term objectives of achieving peace and facilitating development. Although compensation is a significant aspect of conflict resolution in many Solomon Islands cultures, the amount of money involved and the manner in which payments were made following the coup were unlike any traditional practice, wherein compensation is usually paid in the course of other ceremonies that facilitate the restoration of relationships. Compensation is only one component of such a ceremony. In contrast the compensations paid in recent months legitimated a "culture of compensation" that was often associated with threats.

The immediate impact of the huge compensation payments was to exhaust government funds. The Central Bank of Solomon Islands stated that the suspension of production by income-generating industries and increasing demands for compensation had brought the Solomon Islands economy to the verge of collapse. By January 2001, the government had borrowed above the legal ceiling for borrowing from the Central Bank and had depleted all other domestic borrowing sources (SIBC News, 20 Jan 2001). In November 2001, responding to claims by the prime minister and the deputy prime minister that the Central Bank would lend money to the government for compensation payments, the governor of the Central Bank denied any such commitment. He was reported to have said that "the present financial situation faced by the country would not allow the bank to make any further [loan] to the government" (*Solomon Star*, 15 Nov 2001).

Politically, the country was threatening to disintegrate. Provinces such as Makira and Temotu, frustrated by the negative impact of the crisis, the inability of the government to resolve it, and the payment of millions of dollars in compensation to Malaita and Guadalcanal people, declared "self-government." Rennell and Bellona

declared themselves a state. Even more devastating, Western and Choiseul provinces declared themselves states and threatened to withhold all revenue generated within their boundaries.

The state was further weakened by internal tensions and competition between and among its various sections. The police refused to take orders from the civilian government. Long-standing competition for resources between sections of the state significantly shapes its policies and actions, as well as its capacity to contribute to the peace process. When the crisis in Guadalcanal began, some members of the government saw its role as a mediator, assuming that it was not a party to the conflict. But that was not the case. Other members of the government were far from impartial and were party to the conflict. Other organs of the state were also involved; the police, for example, were responsible for the killing of a member of the Isatabu Freedom Movement in December 1998.

The weakness of the Solomons state raises questions about its ability to create or impose law and order, as well as its potential significance in the peace process.

First, if the state is as weak as portrayed here, then why does it matter that certain individuals control state institutions? The answer is partly that the state still has some resources (including trained paramilitary personnel and weapons, as well as money). When used by the conflicting parties, these can contribute to a worsening of the conflict as occurred in mid-2000. Moreover, the state is an internationally recognized political entity. Recognition by foreign governments and international intergovernmental organizations gives legitimacy to the state and strengthens it against internal attempts to undermine or even to reform it. States such as Solomon Islands are able to survive in the form Jackson called “quasi states,” which lack domestic viability but are propped up by international aid, diplomatic recognition, and (sometimes) investment (Jackson 1990). Often, such international recognition ignores domestic opposition to a government and may serve to suppress or even eliminate critics of the regime.

So far, the post-coup Solomon Islands government has managed to keep state institutions operating partly because of international recognition and assistance. For instance, following the coup of June 2000, the Australian government was the first to recognize the government-elect, despite its coming into office after the forced resignation of the previous prime minister and the elections being held under duress. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer was the first foreign

representative to congratulate Manasseh Sogavare.¹⁸

Since October 2000, the Taiwanese government has pumped millions of dollars into Solomon Islands in the form of both grants and loans. More recently, a loan worth SI\$127 million was approved by Taiwan. Other international institutions such as the Commonwealth Secretariat attempted to assist in holding the state together by providing police personnel and a special envoy, Major General Sitiveni Rabuka, and his counterpart, Ade Fuya, from the secretariat. Others provided financial assistance.

However, much of this money was channeled to non-state organizations and individuals who use the state as a front to further non-state interests. The state is weak in terms of its ability to perform its obligations but is still useful to those who control it as a front for international recognition. It will not collapse and disappear, even though it no longer performs proper functions and because it is in the interest of those who survive on it to give an impression that there is a state in place. It further serves the interests of neighbors and other international parties to behave as if there is a functioning state in Solomon Islands. Taiwan, for example, is counting on its vote in the United Nations. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in November 2001, caretaker Prime Minister Sogavare reiterated the Solomon Islands government's support for Taiwan's admission to the United Nations (*Solomon Star*, 16 Nov 2001).

Because international recognition legitimates and consolidates the position of those who control state institutions, rhetoric about strengthening the state must be used cautiously. Any strengthening of the state in the Solomon Islands might assist in consolidating the positions of those who currently control state institutions for the purpose of private gain.

Turning to the second question, if the state is so weak, how could it contribute effectively to the peace process? It cannot contribute to peace unaided. In the Solomon Islands case, the continuing assumption that the state can effectively carry out the peace process is problematic. A deliberate effort by those currently in control of the state is keeping others out of the peace process, preventing the state from contributing to lasting peace. Because of the informal controls by non-elected individuals and non-state organizations, civil society is kept out. If the state is to play an important role, these informal relationships and the corruption that characterizes the crisis era must be ended. As long as a few elites control state institutions and reap the benefits from its actions, the state cannot contribute to a long-term solution.

Because of the state's inability to act without support, the role played by other

organizations and entities, especially non-government organizations, must be explored. In the Solomons these groups constitute what is generally known as the civil society network.

Civil Society and the Peace Process

The term *civil society* refers to churches, non-government organizations, women's organizations, business houses, village communities, and individuals who have worked together to offer reflections and analysis of the crisis and ways toward conflict resolution that are different from those of the militants and the government. The civil society network has no organizational structure but is merely a network of groups and individuals. The notion of civil society has been around for centuries, but has been used in the last decade to describe how non-governmental groups relate to the state. Civil society exists between various individual kinship and ethnic groups and at times serves to link them to the state. It can include churches, professional groups, trade unions, women's groups, and sporting associations, all groups that can represent individuals or groups within society without being elected to a public office such as parliament.

During the civil unrest in 1999–2000, civil society groups played a prominent role in attempts to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. Churches, represented by the Solomon Islands Christian Association, organized meetings and tried to bring people together. The Melanesian Brotherhood in the Church of Melanesia was important in persuading the militants not to fight and in providing an avenue of communication between the two militant groups. Stories were told of the Melanesian Brothers (*tasiu*) standing between the groups at the height of the fighting.

Women crossed boundaries to talk and pray with the warring groups. In May 2000 they (especially those in Honiara) held discussions, produced a Women's Communiqué on Peace, and established a group known as the Women for Peace (Liloqula and Pollard 2000, 9–14; Pollard 2000). The Honiara women's group contacted women around Guadalcanal, who joined them in attempts to resolve the crisis (Paina-Tovosia 2000). A Guadalcanal Women's Association was established and launched its constitution in September 2001.

By mid-2000 the civil society network had taken root in Honiara and branched out to other parts of the country, with representatives in all the provinces. It became the foundation for a powerful force in providing alternative views and perceptions about

the way forward. A Peace Office was established under the umbrella of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA). Apart from the peace process, the civil society network was beginning to inform and influence political processes and outcomes, especially in Honiara. When the government proposed to extend the life of the interim parliament for another year, the civil society network rallied public opposition against it.

In a situation where the state is weak, or the state itself is party to civil conflict, the role of civil society is important. During the discussions in Townsville it was expected that civil society representatives would help in the implementation of the agreement. Later, the former leader of the International Peace Monitoring Team, David Hegarty, acknowledged the importance of civil society: “the government, civil society and other key groups must be drawn more fully into the peace process” (2001, 3).

Nevertheless, the participation of civil society in the peace process was greatly hindered by a number of factors. First, it is often naively assumed that civil society organizations are politically impartial. However, in the Solomons Islands context (as in most places) people join civil society groups because they have a particular political opinion or are committed to a particular cause, often because they disagree with government policies and actions. They participate in civil society–initiated activities in order to push a particular political agenda. In the Solomons case, many citizens disagreed with the nature of political developments, especially after the coup of June 2000.

Being seen as aligned to a political party or group in Solomon Islands carries with it all kinds of negative stigmas, especially when the country is preparing for elections. For example, the involvement of members of civil society who are related to or *wantoks* of Bartholomew Ulufa‘alu may be interpreted as part of a campaign to return him to power. Consequently, and unfortunately, remarks by such persons, however helpful, may be dismissed as campaign rhetoric and not given due consideration. Likewise, in September 2001 a former MEF leader accused two leading figures in the civil society network of using the name of civil society to campaign for the coming election (*Solomon Star*, 18 Sept 2001). Another former MEF leader alleged that civil society was merely a political party campaigning for the next election and went further to say that the civil society groups were instruments of Ulufa‘alu’s attempt to regain office.¹⁹ Such perceptions, whether valid or not, greatly affect the capacity of civil society to participate effectively. In a more stable situation, where politics is defined in the broad

sense and not simply about electioneering, they would not affect civil society's participation.

Second, the civil society network is complex and dynamic because it involves many individuals and organizations with diverse interests and objectives. There is no single civil society view or approach toward conflict resolution. Although normal (and even desirable) this diversity affects civil society's effectiveness in the peace process. During the crisis, differences within and between organizations and individuals often affected the capacity of the network to form a consensus. In August 2001, for instance, a disagreement among SICA members over the appointment of a general secretary caused internal discord and affected the operations of the Peace Office and the network in general. The churches can play an important role in the peace process when not hindered by the politics of difference between denominations.

The diverse interests and objectives of the civil society network are partly a consequence of its unorganized structure—it lacks a constitution and formal office bearers. But, this is also a strength. In the absence of a formal structure, militants and the government were not very clear about whom and how to approach in civil society. Governments are used to dealing with organizations, not with a loose collection of individuals and groups. Thus, it was more difficult to “buy off” or coopt the network.

Third, the role of civil society was undermined by armed militants' intimidation of members. Matthew Wale, a prominent figure in civil society, was attacked by MEF militants because he questioned their authority in Honiara. His house was destroyed, and he and his family had to temporarily leave the country in September 2000. The acting director of the University of the South Pacific's Honiara Centre, Julian Treadaway, was also attacked after he planned a seminar on the issue of amnesty to militants and those who had participated in the crisis. Following a threat by MEF leader Andrew Nori, journalist Duran Angiki evacuated his family from Honiara and moved to the Western township of Gizo. On 19 September 2001 during the review of the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement, a high-ranking police officer from the Rapid Response Unit assaulted Wale during lunch break—an incident that occurred in the presence of other police officers (who shouted their support for their colleague) and the deputy prime minister and minister for National Unity, Peace and Reconciliation, William Haomae. At the time of writing, the police officer responsible had not been disciplined. For a civil society to function, there must be a common acceptance of the rights of political expression.

Within Guadalcanal numerous cases of intimidation prevented “ordinary” people from speaking out against IFM activities. State representatives no longer stay in south Guadalcanal (the Weather Coast) because of fears of militant intimidation and reprisal. The member of parliament for South Guadalcanal, Victor Ngele, was unable to visit his constituency for nearly three years because of threats from militants. Air services to south Guadalcanal were suspended indefinitely following Harold Keke’s capture and destruction of a Solomon Airlines plane at Babanakira in October 2000.

Apart from the overt intimidation by militants, subtle intimidation was used by those who control state institutions and act in the name of the state. For example, the Sogavare government refused civilian participation in many of the peace meetings, apparently because they saw it as threatening. Those in government were uncomfortable with civil society’s questioning of their authority and the legitimacy of their grab for power. During the Townsville peace talks, when the Guadalcanal delegation requested the participation of civilians and members of the parliamentary opposition, the deputy prime minister stated: “the Solomon Islands Government has always maintained . . . that the civil society be allowed to participate in the peace negotiations provided all three parties to the Peace Talks agree. This is not the case.” And, “the importance of parliamentary Opposition input was well appreciated. However, when invited, there was no response. I can only say my ministry had tried its best.”²⁰

During the review of the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement, the former MEF commanders strongly objected to civil society participation, primarily because they feared that civil society would question the legitimacy of the events of June 2000, question the amnesty issue, and demand that truth be revealed about people’s participation in the crisis. Although it was eventually agreed that civil society would be allowed to participate in the discussions, but not in the drawing up of resolutions, most civil society representatives withdrew following the assault on Wale.

In general, the leaders of the state view civil society as a threat and refuse to engage its representatives in discussions, predominantly because they expect them to question government policies and the legitimacy of the government brought into power after the coup. With institutions such as the police thoroughly compromised, civil society representatives cannot rely on them for protection. Despite its huge potential moral power, civil society is very vulnerable in the Solomon Islands.

Armed Militants

The peace process is further complicated by the militarization of society, especially young men and youth, as a result of the crisis. Many former militants continue to possess or have access to weapons, even after the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement. The Peace Monitoring Council has estimated that about five hundred high-powered rifles are still in the hands of former militants or police officers who joined militant groups during the crisis (PMC 2001a). Most of these weapons were taken from the state armory. A gun culture has developed that is both glamorous and profitable for those who hitherto were marginalized and disadvantaged.

Among the Guadalcanal militants, the knowledge of how to manufacture and use home-made guns has become widespread, so that despite the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement and its requirement for disarmament, home-made arms can be quickly manufactured should those involved perceive a need for them. The access to firearms has also led to their frequent use in criminal activities.

Since the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement, guns have been used in demands for compensation, threats to state officials, killings, and other criminal activities. The weakness of the state leaves it in no position to address this law-and-order problem, which has been further exacerbated by the disintegration of the police force. The state is unable to effectively enforce the law. The reengagement of many police officers who participated in the forceful overthrow of the Ulufa'alu government poses doubts about the loyalty of the force. In the long run it sets a precedent that suggests it is acceptable to influence political processes and outcomes by forcefully overthrowing a democratically elected government. It implies that in the future, if one wants to influence a political outcome, all one needs to do is to use the police. The public's confidence in the police was further eroded by the recruitment of former militants as special constables following the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement. Those involved in atrocities at the height of the crisis now wear the police badge. Lacking discipline, the police force might also be used in the future against both the state and civilians.

The availability of arms has also caused an increase in the frequency of disputes and killings within the two major groups involved in the Guadalcanal crisis. For example, in February 2001 two elderly men were killed following local disputes in Suava, north Malaita. Other incidents have occurred among both Guadalcanal and Malaita groups. Such an internal dispute led to an arson attack in February 2001 on the office of MEF

lawyer and spokesperson Andrew Nori. The person who allegedly set fire to Nori's office was later shot and killed by another Malaita faction. In October 2001 Charles Dausabea, the member of parliament for East Honiara and a prominent figure in the post-coup period, was harassed when guns were fired at his home.

Another example of armed militants destabilizing the peace process was the recent series of uprisings led by Harold Keke in Guadalcanal, which intensified following a joint operation by the police and some former IFM members on the Weather Coast in March 2001. In an attempt to capture Harold Keke, a patrol boat and state arms were used; in the process about six people were killed and many villages destroyed.

The state is no position to stop such activity, backed as it is by a police force so divided along island groups that their impartiality and values are severely compromised.

In Guadalcanal, more high-powered rifles were in the hands of militants after the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement than at the height of the crisis in 2000. Most of these guns were either sold to former IFM members or transferred to them by police officers and former MEF members. Many of the rifles are now being used to settle local conflicts between factions on the island. Guadalcanal's most immediate conflict since the peace agreement was signed is not with Malaitans, but among its own people. The attempted assassination of provincial Premier Ezekiel Alebua on 1 June 2001 is a result of that conflict. As I write, a volatile situation continues to exist between former IFM leaders, with Andrew Te'e and Alebua on one side, and Harold Keke and Joe Sangu on the other. Such conflicts are exacerbated by the continuing availability of arms. On west Guadalcanal, for example, pump-action shotguns have been sold for SI\$800 while SLR and SR88 weapons were being sold for SI\$1,000.

At present, one of the most immediate security issues and challenges for the Solomon Islands is disarmament. Any process of disarmament must be both physical and psychological, getting rid not only of the guns in people's hands but also of the guns in their heads. As long as there are armed militants with no hope of gainful employment, the peace process will remain at risk. The presence of guns in communities has also intimidated those seeking to resist the use of violence, especially because militants have demonstrated on many occasions that they have no qualms about using their weapons.

Conclusions

Given that the state is relatively weak, it is unlikely that it will effectively lead the peace process. Current attempts at strengthening the state will only strengthen the domination of the state by those who now control it. Initiatives and rhetoric about strengthening the state will be counterproductive, unless the individuals involved in the coup are brought to justice. Otherwise the situation of unequal access to and control of the state will be perpetuated. Because the present government came to power through illegitimate means, strengthening its position will create a situation where further uprisings in the future are inevitable.

Once a legitimate government is restored, it must address underlying issues and facilitate the introduction of a federal system of government. Otherwise provinces such as Western and Choiseul are likely to ask for more benefits, to participate more in control of the state, or to attempt to secede.

If foreign governments and international institutions are to contribute to long-term peace, their assistance must be cautiously administered. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that moneys provided are spent for the intended purpose and properly accounted for.

External assistance is essential, at least for a period, if former militants are to be disarmed and the police force disciplined, as required under the peace agreement. For this to happen, enough incentives must be provided to former militants—through appropriate amnesty procedures, economic inducements, educational opportunities, and other social services.

Given that civil society groups are continually being intimidated, it is unlikely that they will contribute effectively to conflict resolution. Civil society must be provided the security and the space to engage the broader society in the peace process.

For real conflict resolution to occur and true peace to be achieved, justice must be served. Here, the term *justice* is defined in the broad sense to include not only retributive justice, but restorative justice as well. The conflict resolution process must be reexamined in a creative manner. Currently, attempts to facilitate peace are accompanied by very little in the way of conflict resolution.

All levels of the conflict must be addressed. Since the peace agreement was signed, the locus of conflict has shifted from the Malaita–Guadalcanal confrontation to various levels within Solomon Islands society. A lot of tension within the former militant groups must be resolved. On Guadalcanal, for example, conflicts between the various

factions must be settled. Without such reconciliations at the local level, and between islands, any review of the Townsville Peace Agreement will be meaningless.

Although some may argue that the peace process in Solomon Islands is working positively, they must recognize that the absence of overt violence does not necessarily mean the presence of peace. As long as there is no justice in Solomon Islands, peace will be a farfetched idea.

* * *

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Notes

¹ Different opinions have been expressed on when, how, and why Guadalcanal militants organized the uprising. For instance, a document from the governing Solomon Islands Alliance for Change argued that the crisis was a result of opposition members' attempts to overthrow the government (SIAC 2000).

² The name Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army was first used by the media and commentators who saw the group as resembling the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which for more than a decade had fought a secessionist war in the neighboring North Solomons Province of Papua New Guinea. The word *Isatabu* was supposedly the name for the island before the Spanish explorer, Alvaro de Mendana, named it Guadalcanal. The name for the Guadalcanal group was changed from Isatabu Freedom Fighters to Isatabu Freedom Movement to portray the idea of them being a political movement fighting for rights rather than a criminal militant group.

³For detailed discussions of the Solomon Islands crisis see Kabutaulaka 2001; Liloqula and Pollard 2000, 2–8.

⁴ Personal communication from Ministry of Education official, March 1998. This statistic was for the period before the crisis. It is probably worse since the crisis because many schools, especially on Guadalcanal, are still closed, and those on Malaita are crowded.

⁵"*Bona Fide Demands of the Indigenous Guadalcanal People*," a document submitted to the Solomon Islands Government in February 2000.

⁶ *Big men* is the term used to refer to traditional Melanesian leaders. It is also used to describe the traditional leadership system found in many parts of Melanesia—one that is loosely organized and always shifting around competitive big men who control relatively small-scale political entities.

⁷ Kabutaulaka 2000, 2–4; Liloqula and Pollard 2000, 2–7. Similar issues were raised by Guadalcanal people in a “Petition by the Indigenous People of Guadalcanal” presented to the prime minister in 1988. The two major demands in the petition were: “(i) Halt the brutal killing of the innocent indigenous people of Guadalcanal; (ii) Effect as soon as possible, recommendation No.1 in the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee Report.” Apart from these, they raised concerns over issues such as the increasing number of squatter settlements, distribution of revenue from large-scale natural resource development, and the use of the island’s land for national development.

⁸ *Solomon Star*, 15 May 1999. Rabuka was equating the Guadalcanal militant uprising to the two coups he staged in Fiji in 1987 on the pretext of protecting indigenous Fijian rights over land.

⁹ Solomon Islands has no conventional army. It has a police force and an arm of the police, the Police Field Force, which operates as a small military force. During the height of the Bougainville crisis, the government, then led by Solomon Mamaloni, purchased about SI\$10 million worth of arms from the United States. In 1997, following its election, the Ulufa’alu government prevented some of the arms from entering the country by requesting that some containers be held up in New Zealand. It is uncertain what proportion of the arms eventually arrived in the Solomon Islands.

¹⁰ For an elaborate examination of the weaknesses of the Townsville Peace Agreement, see PMC 2001b. The issues outlined here are discussed in detail later in the paper.

¹¹ For more discussion on the relationship between states and society, especially weak states, see Migdal 1988; for discussion of the state-in-society approach see Migdal 1994; and for papers using Migdal’s concept in Melanesia see Dauvergne 1998.

¹² The peace monitoring work is carried out by the Peace Monitoring Council (PMC), an organization established by the Townsville Peace Agreement for the task of monitoring the peace process and making reports to the Solomon Islands government. The council is also responsible for administering the collection of arms and ammunition from former militants.

¹³ Solomon Islands Ministry of Finance 2001, “List of Compensation Payments: October 2000–April 2001,” 2.

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, 3 August 2001, Prime Minister’s Office, Honiara.

¹⁵ ABC news at <<http://www.abc.net.au/ra/solomon/newsrasi/default.htm>>

¹⁶ Solomon Islands Government, July 2000, “Peace Plan 2000: First 100 Days Programme—Targets, Tasks, Actions,” 11.

¹⁷ This statement was made by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace William Haomae during the review of the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement in Honiara on 20 September 2001.

¹⁸ Downer’s action was inconsistent with Australia’s strong opposition to and refusal to recognize the interim government formed in Fiji following the coup led by George Speight in that country on 19 May 2000.

¹⁹ This opinion was expressed during informal personal discussions at the review of the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement, Forum Fisheries Agency, Honiara, 19 September 2001.

²⁰ Letter from Deputy Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza to leader of the Guadalcanal delegation to the Townsville Peace Talks, 11 October 2001.

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