

**Conflict in the 'Happy Isles':  
The role of ethnicity in the outbreak of violence in  
Solomon Islands**

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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Solomon Islands—an overview of recent events	2
Australia’s changing approach to the South Pacific	3
Ethnic tension	5
Proposed research	8
CHAPTER 2 ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICT	9
Prevalence of ethnic conflict	9
Ethnicity and ethnic conflict—definitions	10
Causes of ethnic conflict	13
Underlying causes	13
Cultural and perceptual factors	13
Structural Factors	15
Weak states	15
Intra-state security concerns	16
Ethnic geography	17
Political Factors	18
Discriminatory political institutions	18
Elite politics	18
Economic and Social Factors	19
Economic problems	19
Discriminatory economic systems	20
Economic development and modernisation	20
Proximate causes	20
Conclusion	22
CHAPTER 3 BACKGROUND TO CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS	23
Ethnic diversity	23
Ethnic geography	24
Cultural and perceptual causes	26
Political and Constitutional Causes	30
National consciousness	30
Governance	31
Constitutional arrangements	33

Economic Causes	34
Structural weaknesses and declining economic indicators	35
Discriminatory economic systems	37
Conclusion	40
CHAPTER 4 CATALYSTS OF CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS	41
Convergence of underlying causes	41
‘Bad leaders’—ethnic entrepreneurs	44
‘Bad domestic problems’—The Ulufa’alu reforms	45
‘Bad neighbourhoods’—Bougainville and Fiji	46
Security dilemmas	47
Conclusion	48
CHAPTER 5 FUTURE PROSPECTS AND SOLUTIONS	49
Ethnic conflict—a continuing threat	49
Reducing the Likelihood of Renewed Ethnic Conflict	50
Constitutional reform	51
Uneven economic development	52
National consciousness	53
Land reform	54
Public sector reform	55
Justice and reconciliation	56
Conclusion	57
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	59

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## **ABSTRACT**

At first blush the conflict in Solomon Islands appears to reflect the ethnic divisions characteristic of so many archipelagic nations that spills over into violence. Yet the instability that bubbled up in 1998 was the result of deep and long-running tensions. While ethnicity played a role the argument presented in this work makes the claim that single determinants like 'ethnic conflict' fail to recognise the varied and complex nature of the causes of the unrest. External and internal factors gave rise to the debilitating conflict that brought Solomon Islands to the brink of collapse. Colonial legacies and the impact of poor national leadership since independence were key factors. But importantly, rapid social and economic change in the last decade fuelled the disparities between the islands and their populations. Competition between political elites and the willingness of ethnic entrepreneurs to create antagonism between ethnic groups that had for decades cohabited peacefully underscores the fragility of post-colonial political arrangements.



## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

On 24 July 2003, an Australian-led military and police mission endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum and consisting of personnel from regional countries arrived in Honiara to help restore law and order in Solomon Islands. The mission, known internationally as OPERATION HELPEM FREN, is a response to requests for assistance from Solomon Islands<sup>1</sup> to end five years of civil unrest and lawlessness which has crippled the economy and led observers such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute to label the country a ‘failed’ or ‘failing’ state.<sup>2</sup> Leadership of the operation and a declared longer-term commitment to restoring effective governance and economic stability to Solomon Islands has signalled the abandonment of Australia’s arms-length approach to engagement in the South Pacific and the adoption of what Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has called ‘cooperative intervention.’<sup>3</sup>

The success of Australian efforts to help restore enduring stability to Solomon Islands will depend on the implementation of programs that address the causes of unrest. An understanding of the factors that led to the outbreak of violence between militants from Guadalcanal and the nearby island of Malaita will be particularly important. This monograph contributes to this process by exploring the role of ethnicity in the social, economic and political life of Solomon Islands and examining claims that ‘ethnic tensions’ lay at the heart of violent clashes between the two groups during the period 1998–2000.

<sup>1</sup> M O’Callaghan, 2003, ‘Solomons MPs vote for intervention’, *The Australian*, 11 July 2003, p. 2; John Howard, 2003, ‘Address to the Sydney Institute’, Intercontinental Hotel, Sydney, 1 July, <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech323.html> (Accessed 20 Jul 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2003, ‘*Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*’, (*Our Failing Neighbour*), ASPI, Canberra, pp. 3, 28; S Dinnen, b2002, ‘Winners and Losers: Politics and Disorder in the Solomon Islands 2000–2002’, (Winners and Losers), *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 37, No. 3, p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> A Downer, 2003, ‘Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands’, speech at the launch of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute report (Launch of ASPI Report), Sydney, 10 June, [http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2003/030610\\_solomonislands.html](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2003/030610_solomonislands.html) (Accessed 24 Aug 2003).

### **Solomon Islands—an overview of recent events**

The causes of Solomon Islands' current problems are the subject of ongoing analysis but there is general agreement regarding the key events that led to the country's descent into lawlessness and economic malaise and the decision by Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza to seek intervention from its neighbours in the South Pacific.<sup>4</sup> Violent conflict on the island of Guadalcanal commenced in 1998 when local residents, resentful of the loss of traditional lands and employment opportunities to migrants from the nearby island of Malaita, began an aggressive campaign of intimidation against the settler group. Acting under the banner of what became known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), armed Guadalcanal men succeeded in forcing approximately 20,000 Malaitans to flee their homes, many reluctantly returning to Malaita. In response to the tactics of the IFM, a rival group known as the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) emerged to protect Malaitan interests and the ensuing conflict between the two groups claimed an estimated 100 lives.

Despite several attempts by the government of Solomon Islands and Commonwealth Special Envoy Sitiveni Rabuka to mediate an end to the conflict, hostilities between the IFM and MEF continued. As a result of these failures and a perceived unwillingness by the government to resolve the problem, members of the MEF, together with elements of the Solomon Islands Police Force, staged a successful coup on 5 June 2000 which forced the Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, to resign. The MEF argued that its actions would help end conflict between Guales and Malaitans and obtain compensation for the Malaitans forced to flee from Guadalcanal. The coup did not, however, bring stability to Solomon Islands and the election by parliament of new Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare was seen by many as illegitimate.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This outline of events provides a framework for more detailed analysis within the monograph. The following sources were used: ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, pp. 21–25; S Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, pp. 287–297; M Otter, 2002, 'Development planning for a divided society in a weak state: The case of Solomon Islands' (*Development Planning for a Divided Society*), paper presented at the 2002 Pacific Development Symposium, Foundation for Development Cooperation, Brisbane, pp. 11–14; K Von Strokirch, 2001, 'The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2000' (*The Region in Review*), *The Contemporary Pacific*, Fall, Volume 13, Issue 2, pp. 514–516.

<sup>5</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 288.

Further unrest and the closure of major enterprises such as the Gold Ridge gold mine and Solomon Islands Plantations Ltd resulted in renewed international efforts to end the crisis. Official hostilities between the warring groups came to an end on 15 October 2000 as part of the Australian-sponsored Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA). The TPA called for the decommissioning of weapons, repatriation of Malaitans and investigations into land ownership on Guadalcanal, but despite high expectations by all sides that it would lead to the end of violent exchanges, it was only partially successful. While organised conflict between the IFM and MEF began to dissipate, a decision by many former militants to retain their weapons led to an increase in general lawlessness and acts of violent crime. This included what amounted to a feud between one of the former militants, Harold Keke, and former members of both the IFM and MEF in which unarmed civilians were killed and numerous houses destroyed.<sup>6</sup> Within this atmosphere, the government was subjected to numerous and often successful attempts by armed former-militants to extort large compensation payments for grievances supposedly related to the conflict.

The election of Sir Allan Kemakeza as Prime Minister on 17 December 2001 did little to improve conditions of lawlessness and corruption within the country. The role of the Solomon Islands Police Force in the coup and suspicions that many of its members were involved in violent actions against residents of Guadalcanal has resulted in limited public faith in its commitment to administering the law in an impartial fashion. Evidence of corruption within the government itself, particularly with regard to the granting of tax remissions on export duties for key supporters, has also led to a lack of public confidence. Added to these concerns is the continued decline in the national economy and the inability of the government to deliver basic public services such as health and education. The decision by the Kemakeza Government to seek support through outside intervention was a last resort to restore stability to the country.

### **Australia's changing approach to the South Pacific**

The Australian Government's decision to respond favourably to the call for assistance reflects a major change in policy. As late as March 2003, Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper—*Advancing the National Interest*, indicated an unwillingness to become directly involved in the affairs of island states in the South Pacific, noting that 'Australia cannot presume to fix the problems of South Pacific countries.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, *Advancing the National Interest: Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper*, 2003, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 93.

This approach was in keeping with comments made by Alexander Downer on 8 January 2003 in which he claimed that ‘foreigners do not have answers for the deep-seated problems afflicting Solomon Islands.’<sup>8</sup>

In a speech to the Australian parliament on 12 August 2003 which outlined the case for intervention, Prime Minister John Howard acknowledged that direct involvement in Solomon Islands signalled ‘an important change to Australia’s policy’ but one that was required in the national interest.<sup>9</sup> Noting that failed states make unstable neighbours, he suggested that ‘failed states can all too easily become safe-havens for transnational criminals and even terrorists.’<sup>10</sup> He went on to conclude that ‘in these circumstances we jointly concluded that intervention was not only appropriate, but necessary.’<sup>11</sup>

The essential objectives of the Australian-led mission are outlined in *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Island*, a report developed by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and which has been endorsed by the Australian Government.<sup>12</sup> The ASPI report provides a blue print for restoring stability to Solomon Islands through a two-phased approach. The first phase of the process is essentially a law and order operation reflected in the work of OPERATION HELPEM FREN. The ASPI report anticipates that it will be ‘a one-year program to stabilise the situation in Solomon Islands by restoring law and order and addressing the other immediate problems which are undermining its viability.’<sup>13</sup> The second phase of the operation is expected to be longer and more complicated. As noted by the author of the ASPI report, Elsinia Wainwright, the ‘second phase would focus on longer-term capacity-building by helping to fashion effective security institutions (particularly police) and political structures, as well as addressing economic and social issues such as education.’<sup>14</sup>

The commitment of the Australian Government to Solomon Islands is substantial and ASPI has estimated that an involvement of up to ten years may be required.<sup>15</sup> Foreign Minister Downer confirmed the enduring nature of Australia’s commitment when he suggested that the rebuilding of Solomon Islands’ ‘infrastructure of government’ would take years rather than weeks or months.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A Downer, 2003, ‘Neighbours cannot be recolonised’, *The Australian*, 8 January, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> J Howard, 2003, ‘Ministerial Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands’ (*Ministerial Statement 12 August 2003*), 12 August, <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech422.html> (Accessed 24 Aug 2003).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Downer launched the report on 10 June 2003.

<sup>13</sup> ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> E Wainwright, 2003, ‘Rescuing Solomons makes sense’, *The Australian*, 12 June, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> ABC Online, 2003, ‘Downer says law and order must be established first in Solomons’, PM, Wednesday, 25 June, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2003/s888202.htm> (Accessed 8 Jul 2003).

The cost of Australia's long-term involvement has been estimated by ASPI to be in the vicinity of \$853 million over a decade.<sup>17</sup> Research by *The Australian*, however, indicated that the cost of restoring stability to Solomon Islands could be as high as \$2 billion for a ten-year involvement.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ethnic tension**

In launching the ASPI report, Alexander Downer claimed that the problems faced by Solomon Islands were 'chronic lawlessness and economic decline' and that ethnic tensions, which had caused much of the violence in 1998–2000, had dissipated as a result of the TPA.<sup>19</sup> The ASPI report echoes this assessment<sup>20</sup> but nevertheless recommends a long-term plan for the development of key economic and social capabilities that would lead to the 'progressive amelioration of the causes of ethnic/tribal/communal animosities.'<sup>21</sup> The role of ethnicity in the events of 1998–2000 requires significant understanding if these goals are to be met.

A majority of commentators have ascribed the causes of Solomon Islands' descent into lawlessness to either 'ethnic tensions' or 'ethnic conflict'. International and Australian media outlets have been particularly eager to employ these terms as both an explanation and description of events. News reports from CNN have included headlines such as 'Ethnic fighting erupts on Solomon Islands'<sup>22</sup> and have described the IFM and MEF as 'rival militias embroiled in ethnic tension and fighting.'<sup>23</sup> BBC commentary on OPERATION HELPEM FREN has questioned whether 'an answer to the long-standing ethnic tensions that caused the chaos may well be beyond this intervention'<sup>24</sup> and the *New Zealand Herald* has attributed the deaths of many in Solomon Islands to 'years of ethnic clashes between rival Malaita and Guadalcanal islanders.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> M O'Callaghan, 2003, 'Solomons rescue bill at \$2bn', *The Australian*, 27 June, [http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story\\_page/0,5744,6660617%5E2702,00](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,6660617%5E2702,00) (Accessed 27 Jun 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Downer, Launch of ASPI Report.

<sup>20</sup> ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> CNN, 2000, 'Ethnic fighting erupts on Solomon Islands; caucus ponders PM's future', 7 June, <http://edition.cnn.com/2000/ASIANOW/australasia/06/06/solomons.unrest/index.html> (Accessed 23 Aug 2003).

<sup>23</sup> CNN, 2000, 'Rival premiers call for peace pact in Solomons', 22 June, <http://edition.cnn.com/2000/ASIANOW/australasia/06/22/solomons.unrest/index.html> (Accessed 23 Aug 2003).

<sup>24</sup> P Mercer, 2003, 'Solomon islanders dream of peace', BBC News, 31 July, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3113663.stm> (Accessed 20 Aug 2003).

<sup>25</sup> *The New Zealand Herald* – Reuters, 2003, 'Foreign accountants take over Solomons purse-strings', 19 August, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/storyprint.cfm?storyID=3518681> (Accessed 23 Aug 2003).

Australian publications such as *The Bulletin* have mirrored these commentaries by suggesting that Solomon Islands is ‘failing because of ethnic and territorial violence.’<sup>26</sup>

International organisations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International have also given credence to the ‘ethnic tension’ thesis. In October 2002, a United Nations-sponsored team visited Solomon Islands with the express purpose of ‘helping the country’s government reduce ethnic tension and stop ongoing violence.’<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International’s investigation of the conflict stopped short of using the terms ‘ethnic tension’ or ‘ethnic conflict’ but nevertheless suggested that tension between rival ethnic groups from Guadalcanal and Malaita had led to violent conflict.<sup>28</sup>

Commentators in Solomon Islands have attempted to explain the situation in their country in terms of ethnic tension and competition. In a series of short papers written prior to his forced resignation, Bartholomew Ulufa’alu sought to explore the conflict between Guales and Malaitans in terms of ethnicity.<sup>29</sup> Similar views were expressed more recently by the Governor-General of Solomon Islands, Sir John Ini Lapli, who referred to the ‘ethnic confrontations of 1998 to 2001 between some Malaita men and Guadalcanal men’ and suggested that Malaitans ‘were victims of what appeared to be attempts at ethnic cleansing.’<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the Australian Government has consistently referred to the problems of Solomon Islands in terms of their ethnic character. Numerous speeches and press releases by Alexander Downer have identified ‘ethnic tension’ as the cause of problems in Solomon Islands.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> T Wright, 2003, ‘High Noon in the Solomon Islands’, *The Bulletin*, July 15, pp. 20–25.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations, 2002, ‘UN Seeks Ways to Cut Solomon Is. Ethnic Tension’, Press Release, 25 October, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0210/S00204.htm> (Accessed 23 Aug 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International, 2000, *Solomon Islands: A Forgotten Conflict*, Amnesty International, London, p. 2, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGASA430052000> (Accessed 8 Jul 2003).

<sup>29</sup> B Ulufa’alu, 2000, ‘Beneath Guadalcanal—A consistent account of the ethnic tension and reform, the implications and prospects’, Serialised public statements by Bartholomew Ulufa’alu, Office of the Prime Minister, Solomon Islands, 3 March, [http://www.commerce.gov.sb/ministries/beneath\\_guadalcanal\\_cover.htm](http://www.commerce.gov.sb/ministries/beneath_guadalcanal_cover.htm) (Accessed 20 Aug 2003).

<sup>30</sup> J Lapli, 2003, ‘A Solomon Islands Perspective’, ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: A Downer, 2000, ‘Solomon Islands: Australian assistance’, Media Release FA63, 20 June, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/fa063\\_2000.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/fa063_2000.html) (Accessed 18 Jun 2003); A Downer, 2000, ‘Solomon Islands: Signature of the Townsville Peace Agreement’, Media Release FA117, 15 October, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/fa117a\\_2000.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/releases/foreign/fa117a_2000.html) (Accessed 18 Jun 2003).

Indeed, one of the stated aims of the TPA facilitated by Australia was ‘the restoration of peace and ethnic harmony in Solomon Islands.’<sup>32</sup> As recently as 12 August 2003, John Howard referred to ethnic tensions as the primary factor that led to unrest in Solomon Islands in the period 1998–2000.<sup>33</sup>

A number of academic commentators, however, believe that the causes of instability in Solomon Islands are more varied and complex than the above accounts would appear to suggest and that attempts to assign the events of 1998–2000 to single determinants such as ‘ethnic conflict’ or ‘ethnic tension’ are misleading. Lawson, for example, argues that ‘where such tensions do exist, they are usually accompanied by other elements such as disputes over land, economic disparities, and a lack of confidence in governments’ ability or willingness to solve the basic problems.’<sup>34</sup> The rejection of an overly-simplified approach reliant on the ‘ethnic tension’ thesis is also shared by Kabutaulaka who has expressed frustration with commentators who ‘have taken the easiest choice and explained the events of the past two years as simply a result of ethnic differences between the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita.’<sup>35</sup> Bennett, who suggests that ‘the jargon of the Balkans has been transposed to Melanesia’, has expressed similar views.<sup>36</sup>

Due either to an unwillingness by proponents of the ‘ethnic tension’ thesis to develop cogent arguments that go beyond the headlines or the rejection by others of ethnicity as an essential element in the events of 1998–2000, there remains a possibility that the role of ethnicity in Solomon Islands will fail to be understood. Crocombe has highlighted this risk by noting that ethnicity ‘is the issue around which the others tend to coalesce when frustrations break into violence’ and that rather than dismissing or down-playing it as a factor in the domestic affairs of South Pacific states, further work is required to understand its role in the outbreak of violence in countries such as Solomon Islands.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Townsville Peace Agreement, 2000, p. 1, <http://www.commerce.gov.sb/Others/Peace%20agreement.htm> (Accessed 20 Aug 2003).

<sup>33</sup> J Howard, 2003, ‘Ministerial Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands’, 12 August, <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech422.html> (Accessed 24 Aug 2003).

<sup>34</sup> S Lawson, 2003, ‘Security in Oceania: Perspectives on the Contemporary Agenda’, in E Shibuya and J Rolfe (eds), *Security in Oceania in the 21st Century*, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> TT Kabutaulaka, 2001, ‘Beyond Ethnicity: The Political Economy of the Guadalcanal Crisis in Solomon Islands’ (*Beyond Ethnicity*), *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Working Paper 01/1*, Australian National University, <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/tarcisusworkingpaper.htm> (Accessed 10 May 2003), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> J Bennett, 2002, ‘Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands, Though Much is Taken, Much Abides: Legacies of Tradition and Colonialism’ (*Roots of Conflict*), *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2002/5*, Australian National University, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> R Crocombe, 2003, ‘Responding to Threats to the Pacific Islands Region’, in E Shibuya and J Rolfe (eds), *Security in Oceania in the 21st Century*, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, p. 224.

Determining the relationship between ethnic identity and political, economic and social pressures would appear to be a difficult yet worthwhile objective of further study in its own right. That the long-term success of the Australian intervention in Solomon Islands depends upon an understanding of such dynamics makes such a task especially important.

### **Proposed research**

This monograph will test assertions that ethnic tension was the catalyst for unrest in Solomon Islands. It will draw on research on the causes and nature of ethnic conflict in other parts of the world in order to provide a conceptual framework for detailed analysis of recent events in Solomon Islands during the period 1998–2000. Where available, it will employ primary and secondary materials to provide insights into the motivation of IFM and MEF militants and their supporters. It will also seek to identify both the underlying and proximate causes of unrest by examining the enduring legacies of colonial rule and the impact of decisions by leaders of Solomon Islands in the post-independence period.

## CHAPTER 2 ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

A thorough exploration of the role of ethnicity in the conflict between the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) and the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and an assessment of its potential future impact on the social, economic and political life of Solomon Islands requires a strong conceptual framework. An understanding of the factors that are essential to the formation of ethnic identity and the reasons why it has proven central in the development of many violent intra-state conflicts elsewhere in the world must underpin an analysis of the motives for militant activity in Solomon Islands. Such analysis should also be supported by an appreciation of why outbreaks of ethnic conflict are more prevalent in weak or failing states. This chapter draws upon research on the causes and nature of ethnic conflict to provide a basis for an examination of recent events in Solomon Islands and an assessment of the country's fortunes over the next ten years.

### Prevalence of ethnic conflict

The increasing incidence of intra-state conflict in many parts of the world has been a prominent feature of international affairs in the past 30 years. Violent conflict has been particularly prevalent in the former states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and in the post-colonial states of Africa and Asia. The causes of many of these conflicts have been attributed to 'ethnic tensions' or 'sectarian differences'.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of conflict has led commentators such as Hutchison and Smith to note that 'we are witnessing a series of explosive ethnic revivals across the globe.'<sup>2</sup> These views are shared by Connor who has observed that 'ethnic nationalism poses the most serious threat to political stability in a host of states as geographically dispersed as Belgium, Burma [Myanmar], Ethiopia, Guyana, Malaysia, Nigeria, the Soviet Union, Sri Lanka, Yugoslavia, and Zimbabwe.'<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars of international relations have reportedly been 'stunned by both the breadth and depth of the ethnic conflicts that are now taking place in many regions.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B Crawford, 1998, 'The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach' (*The Causes of Cultural Conflict*), in B Crawford and RD Lipschutz, *The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict': Politics, Economics, and 'Cultural' Violence*, University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection, Research Series #98, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/research/98/> (Accessed 9 Jul 2003), p. 3; G Evans and J Newnham, 1998, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations (Dictionary of International Relations)*, Penguin Books, London, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> J Hutchison and AD Smith, (eds), 1996, *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. v.

<sup>3</sup> W Connor, 1994, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding (Ethnonationalism)*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> ME Brown, (ed.), 1993, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security (Ethnic Conflict and International Security)*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 3.

In response to this apparent growth in the number of intra-state conflicts inflamed by ethnic hostilities, large numbers of sociologists, anthropologists and international relations scholars have focused their attention on understanding the nature and causes of ethnic conflict and have produced a considerable body of literature that attempts to shed light on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting the importance now given to the study of ethnicity, Brown has suggested that, ‘scholars who care about war and peace issues should care about the causes and consequences of nationalistic and ethnic conflicts.’<sup>6</sup>

### **Ethnicity and ethnic conflict—definitions**

Despite best endeavours to understand the role of ethnicity in the generation of intra-state conflict, commonly accepted definitions of terms such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic identity’ and ‘ethnic conflict’ remain elusive. Griffiths and O’Callaghan have observed that, ‘terms such as “ethnic groups” and “ethnic conflict” have become quite common, although their meaning is ambiguous and vague.’<sup>7</sup> These views are shared by Kellas who claims that such ambiguity causes serious problems for students of the subject.<sup>8</sup> The difficulties and pitfalls associated with developing workable definitions have also been noted by Nash who suggests that, “‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ are among the most complicated, volatile, and emotionally charged words and ideas in the lexicon of social science.”<sup>9</sup> Given these concerns, it is important to establish a firm understanding of the term ‘ethnicity’ before commencing a more detailed analysis of the causes of ethnic conflict.<sup>10</sup> According to many scholars, feelings of common identity or ethnicity within a group are based primarily on objective indicators. Weber, for example, believed that ethnic groups were those which held a ‘belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration.’<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> M Guibernau and J Rex, 1997, *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration (The Ethnicity Reader)*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> ME Brown, and OR Cote (et al.), 1997, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict (Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict)*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> M Griffiths and T O’Callaghan, 2002, *International Relations: The Key Concepts (International Relations)*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup> JG Kellas, 1991, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity (The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity)*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> M Nash, 1989, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World (The Cauldron of Ethnicity)*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> While drawing on sociological and anthropological theory, this monograph seeks to understand ethnicity and ethnic conflict from an international relations perspective.

<sup>11</sup> M Weber, ‘What is an ethnic group?’ in Guibernau and Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader*, pp.18–19.

Similar views are shared by Smith who defines an ethnic group as ‘a named population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.’<sup>12</sup> More recently, the essential elements of these definitions have been accepted by observers such as Kellas, Musgrave, and Evans and Newnham who have noted the importance of objective boundary markers such as common territory, language, culture, economic organisation and religion in the formation of group identity.<sup>13</sup>

Other commentators have argued that the possession of a common language, religion or territory is not in itself sufficient for the establishment of ethnic consciousness. Eriksen was amongst the first to suggest that a sense of common identity was dependent not only on shared attributes but on the existence of two or more groups and that ‘for ethnicity to come about, the groups must have contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different.’<sup>14</sup> In similar vein, Griffiths and O’Callaghan have suggested that the term ‘ethnicity’ refers to ‘aspects of relationships between groups that consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive’ and that ethnicity is ‘essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of an isolated group.’<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on these arguments to shed light on the apparent emergence of multiple ethnic groups in post-colonial states, Oommen has argued that:

If people with common descent, history and language lived in their ancestral territory, issues of ethnicity would not have arisen. But in the last five hundred years, largely because of colonialism and the migrations accompanied and followed it, the situation has changed drastically.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> AD Smith, ‘Structure and persistence of ethnic’ in Guibernau and Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, p. 2; TD Musgrave, 1997, *Self-Determination and National Minorities*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 154; and Evans and Newnham, *Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths and O’Callaghan, *International Relations*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>16</sup> TK Oommen, 1997, *Citizenship, Nationality and Ethnicity: Reconciling Competing Identities*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 40.

This observation also serves to highlight the fact that ethnic identity and the creation of boundaries between groups is subject to ongoing change. Jenkins has noted, for example, that ‘ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture in which it is a component or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced.’<sup>17</sup> In keeping with this approach, Fearon and Laitin have argued that ethnic identities are socially constructed and that ‘their membership rules, content, and valuation are the products of human action and speech, and that as a result they can and do change over time.’<sup>18</sup> Such views are also shared by Nash who suggests that ethnic identity is a historical product ‘subject to change, redefinition, and varied salience in the lives of members of the group.’<sup>19</sup>

Drawing together the above approaches, the essential elements of ethnicity can be summarised as follows. Ethnic groups are those that consider themselves to share common attributes such as language, religion, racial characteristics or common history or territory. Notwithstanding these shared characteristics, a consciousness of common identity rarely develops in isolation but results from the coming together in close proximity of two or more different groups. While the existence of separate identities are recognised by those inside and outside each group, they are not immutable but are subject to ongoing refinement and change over time depending on social, political and economic circumstances. Subsequent chapters of this monograph will demonstrate that defined ethnic groups are also present in Solomon Islands.

Having established a working definition of ‘ethnicity’ from a range of sources, the process of identifying a commonly accepted meaning of the term ‘ethnic conflict’ is a somewhat more straightforward process. Brown has formulated what is perhaps the simplest and most useful definition by suggesting that ‘an “ethnic conflict” is a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities.’<sup>20</sup> Such a definition encompasses a broad spectrum of relations between ethnic groups, ranging from non-violent competition and tension that manifests solely within the political arena—what Kaufman describes as ‘vibrant, emotionally laden ethnic politics’<sup>21</sup>—to violent ethnic war, acts of genocide and the forced removal of populations from specific territory on the basis of their ethnic identity.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> R Jenkins, 1997, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, SAGE Publications, London, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> JD Fearon, and DD Laitin, 2000, ‘Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity’, *International Organization*, Autumn 2000, Vol. 54, Issue 4, pp. 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> Nash, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> SJ Kaufman, 2001, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War (Modern Hatreds)*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> For a definition of ‘ethnic cleansing’, see: A Bell-Fialkoff, 1996, *Ethnic Cleansing*, Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, pp. 3–4.

The challenge for scholars of ‘ethnic conflict’ is to explain what generates competition between ethnic groups and what leads such competition to result in violent conflict. Such questions remain the subject of much conjecture and debate. The remainder of this chapter reviews current literature on the causes of ethnic conflict to establish solid foundations for a subsequent assessment of the causes of conflict in Solomon Islands.

### **Causes of ethnic conflict**

The outbreak of ethnic conflict has been attributed to numerous factors and background conditions. Those who have sought to understand the causes of ethnic conflict have identified both underlying and proximate factors associated with its incidence. According to Brown, scholars have focused predominantly on the former category, with considerable literature being devoted to exploring the cultural/perceptual, structural, political, and economic/social and factors that appear to explain why particular regions are prone to ethnic violence.<sup>23</sup> He has also noted that less attention has been given to understanding the proximate or catalytic factors that trigger actual conflict.<sup>24</sup> The dichotomy of underlying and proximate factors provides a useful framework by which to review those theories most commonly advanced by scholars to explain the emergence of ethnic conflict.

## **Underlying Causes**

### **Cultural and perceptual factors**

Many scholars and media observers have attributed the outbreak of conflict between ethnic groups to ‘ancient hatreds’ or ‘longstanding bitterness’. According to Crawford, subscribers to this ‘primordialist’ approach to ethnic conflict believe that members of ethnic groups are predisposed to holding negative perceptions of outsiders and that ‘tendencies toward xenophobia and intolerance are more natural to human societies than liberal politics of interest.’<sup>25</sup> While observers have contended that such animosities appear in many cases to be fuelled by ‘legitimate grievances against others for crimes of one kind or another committed at some point in the distant or recent past’<sup>26</sup> there is widespread acceptance that many group histories may also be false or heavily biased. Brown has noted that selective views of the past held by one group tend to portray other ethnic groups ‘as inherently vicious and aggressive.’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> ME Brown, 1997, ‘The Causes of Internal Conflict’ (*The Causes of Internal Conflict*), in Brown and Cote, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>25</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, p. 11.

The primordialist approach has been employed regularly to explain a number of ethnic conflicts. Kaufman has noted, for example, that observers seeking to understand conflict in the Balkans during the 1990s often refer to the longstanding bitterness between ethnic groups as an underlying cause of contemporary problems.<sup>28</sup> Explanations of the emergence of ethnic conflict in the states of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have also taken a similar approach by suggesting that the removal of authoritarian regimes in both countries has ‘lifted the lid’ on ancient animosities.<sup>29</sup>

The utility of the primordialist approach in explaining the causes of ethnic conflict has, however, been contested. Lake and Rothchild, for example, have rejected the central role of ‘ancient hatreds’ in the emergence of most modern ethnic conflicts and have also questioned the view that ‘ethnic passions, long bottled up by repressive communist regimes, [were] simply uncorked by the end of the Cold War.’<sup>30</sup> Crawford has also found flaws in the primordialist argument, suggesting that it does not account for the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Bulgaria or explain how cultural differences actually lead to cultural conflict.<sup>31</sup> Brown poses a similar question by asking why warfare has broken out between some groups that harbour historical grievances but has not emerged between other groups with similar histories.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the primordialist approach cannot be totally dismissed. Kaufman, for example, questions many aspects of primordialism, including use of the tag ‘ancient’ when describing the source of conflicts, but nevertheless stresses that ‘attention to rage, suspicion, and hatred is necessary to understand the ethnic cleansing, mass murders, and other atrocities that visited the [Balkans] in the 1990s.’<sup>33</sup> Brown has also conceded that primordial explanations help explain the bitter nature of many struggles, noting that:

When two groups in close proximity have mutually exclusive, incendiary perceptions of each other, the slightest provocation on either side confirms deeply held beliefs and provides the justification for a retaliatory response. Under conditions such as these, conflict is hard to avoid and even harder to limit once started.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, p. i.

<sup>30</sup> DA Lake and D Rothchild, 1996, ‘Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict’ (*Containing Fear*), *International Security*, Vol. 21, No.2 (Fall 1996), p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, p. i.

<sup>33</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 49.

Indeed, even Crawford acknowledges that ‘hatreds do accumulate and collective memories of victimization can lead populations to respond to leaders who draw on the reserve of those memories to foment hatred.’<sup>35</sup>

## Structural Factors

### Weak states

Many observers have noted the high incidence of ethnic conflict in weak or failing states. The convergence of these phenomena appear to suggest that the deterioration of a government’s control over the state, including its economic and domestic security arrangements, and its capacity to provide basic services, acts as an incubator for ethnic tensions. Brown, for example, has noted that ‘when state structures weaken, violent conflict often follows’ and ‘power struggles between and among politicians and would-be leaders intensify.’<sup>36</sup> In like manner, Carment has noted that when states fail to maintain a functioning economy or deliver basic services such as education and health care, they create an environment of lawlessness which is conducive to the emergence of armed opposition groups.<sup>37</sup>

Such explanations appear particularly relevant to many of the post-colonial states of Africa and Southeast Asia that are experiencing varying levels of internal conflict. Brown has noted that many of them lack ‘political legitimacy, politically sensible borders, and political institutions capable of exercising meaningful control over territory placed under their nominal supervision.’<sup>38</sup> This diagnosis could arguably be applied to states such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Indonesia.

Where ethnic tensions are already well developed, the deterioration of state control may lead to the outbreak of actual violence. Crawford has thus observed that ‘when state institutions that sustain the social contract or repress excluded groups are weakened and placed under pressure by internal or external forces in societies where cultural identity has become politically relevant, ethnic and sectarian violence can erupt.’<sup>39</sup> Kaufman has drawn similar conclusions and has noted that the relaxation of state control permits ethnic groups and their leaders to mobilise politically, resulting in an increased likelihood of ethnic violence.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> D Carment, 2001, ‘Anticipating State Failure’, paper prepared for the conference on ‘Why States Fail and How to Resuscitate Them’, January 19–21, <http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/docs/anticipatingstatefailure.pdf> (Accessed 9 Sep 2003), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 32.

### **Intra-state security concerns**

Weak states have also been seen as fertile ground for the development of other problems that may lead to ethnic violence. In keeping with Rotberg's observation that 'failed states are unable to provide security across the whole of their domains',<sup>41</sup> Posen has suggested that the collapse or impending failure of state authority leads to 'emerging anarchy' within the state itself.<sup>42</sup> Drawing from international relations theory and the concept of the 'security dilemma', Posen argues that the absence of government authority within the state leads members of ethnic groups to become concerned for their safety and to anticipate threats posed to them by other groups.<sup>43</sup> Within such an environment, groups are likely to 'simultaneously "arm"—militarily and ideologically—against each other.'<sup>44</sup>

Lake and Rothchild also acknowledge the potentially destructive impact of collective fears of the future. They argue that as 'groups begin to fear for their safety, dangerous and difficult-to-resolve strategic dilemmas arise that contain within them the potential for tremendous violence.'<sup>45</sup> Such environments are considered volatile and susceptible to rapid escalation of tension to the point where information failures and problems of credible commitment between groups make conflict more likely.<sup>46</sup>

Notwithstanding these arguments, others have considered the 'security dilemma' approach unconvincing. Crawford has suggested that it mistakenly assumes that 'cultural groups, like states, have conflicting and incompatible political interests, and thus they will automatically clash.'<sup>47</sup> She also suggests that the 'security dilemma' approach 'fails to explain cultural conflict and the outbreak of cultural violence in industrial societies where central authority is relatively strong and social contracts are largely considered legitimate.'<sup>48</sup>

<sup>41</sup> RI Rotberg, 2002, 'The New Nature of Nation-State Failure', *The Washington Quarterly*, 25:3, p. 87.

<sup>42</sup> BR Posen, 1993, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict' (*The Security Dilemma*), in ME Brown, (ed.), 1993, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>45</sup> Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear*, p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

### **Ethnic geography**

Scholars have also acknowledged the importance of ethnic geography in the emergence of ethnic conflict. Brown has noted that most states are not ethnically homogenous and that ‘countries with different kinds of ethnic geography are likely to experience different kinds of internal problems.’<sup>49</sup> More specifically, he has observed that ‘states with ethnic minorities are more prone to conflict than others.’<sup>50</sup> The artificial aggregation of disparate ethnic groupings under a single administrative unit or the drawing together of different groups into close geographic proximity clearly creates an environment in which ethnic conflict is more likely.

For a number of states, the possession of multiple ethnic groups is a legacy of colonial rule. Connor has observed that the post-colonial states of Africa and Asia, for example, reflect ‘the essentially happenstance borders that delimited either the sovereignty or the administrative zones of former colonial powers.’<sup>51</sup> Brown has also claimed that such states ‘have complex ethnic demographics and face serious ethnic problems of one kind or another.’<sup>52</sup> These demographic characteristics have been considered more prone to secessionist demands by minorities and have been instrumental in the emergence of ethnic conflict in states such as Rwanda and Indonesia.<sup>53</sup> The continuing communal problems in Fiji are also the result of colonial policies that introduced indentured Indian workers to address domestic labour shortages in the sugar industry.<sup>54</sup> Due to their similar numbers and close cohabitation in major population centres, indigenous and migrant communities in Fiji have proven inclined to perceptions of each other as competitors for political influence and resources.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>51</sup> Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> R Robertson and A Tamanisau 1988, *Fiji: Shattered Coups (Shattered Coups)*, Pluto Press, Leichardt, NSW, p. 4.

## Political Factors

### Discriminatory political institutions

Brown has noted the commonly held belief that ‘the prospects for conflict in a country depend to a significant degree on the type and fairness of its political system.’<sup>55</sup> While authoritarian regimes are believed to generate considerable resentment in this regard, especially if they promote the interests of particular ethnic groups at the expense of others, the constituents of more democratic systems may also develop negative feelings against their political and administrative institutions. This is especially the case ‘if some groups are inadequately represented in government, the courts, the military, the police, political parties, and other state and political institutions.’<sup>56</sup> Beliefs that the system as a whole is favouring some groups over others leads ultimately to its very legitimacy to be questioned and the increased likelihood that groups will resort to violence to protect their interests.<sup>57</sup>

### Elite politics

The likelihood of ethnic conflict emerging in multi-ethnic states is considered to increase when politicians seek to improve their standing with selected populations through an appeal to ethnic politics. According to Lake and Rothchild, these so-called ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ seek office and power by reflecting the polarisation already present in communities and further aggravate tension between ethnic groups through their actions.<sup>58</sup> Crawford has also noted that political entrepreneurs normally emerge in states whose institutions and economies are under pressure and where conditions are supportive of efforts to ‘exploit cultural cleavages and perceived inequities.’<sup>59</sup>

The techniques employed by ethnic entrepreneurs such as Slobadan Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia to garner popular support and to aggravate inter-ethnic tensions included ethnic bashing and scapegoating and they proved adept at using the mass media to spread such messages to domestic populations.<sup>60</sup> Crawford has noted that once such tactics begin to take hold within a population and lead to violent behaviour, a ‘bandwagoning’ effect emerges in which the costs to individuals of not engaging in ethnic protest escalates.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear*, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 25.

She has also observed that where such actions prove successful in attracting support for the leaders of one ethnic group, they raise the incentives for leaders of other ethnic groups to pursue similar tactics.<sup>62</sup>

Some observers, however, have challenged the central role of ethnic entrepreneurs in inciting ethnic unrest. While acknowledging the role of elites or ethnic entrepreneurs as primary agents in the eruption of ethnic violence in the Balkans in the 1990s, Kaufman has questioned their role in conflicts that emerged in the Caucasus region, where ‘hostility and violence bubbled up from below rather than being provoked by top-down manipulation.’<sup>63</sup> Going further, he suggests that, ‘stories of ethnic war need the flexibility to consider that different conflicts are dissimilar in this regard’ and that a ‘focus on the role of leaders encourages analysts to gloss over the role of historical and situational effects, which are important in explaining why manipulative leaders succeed in some places but not others.’<sup>64</sup>

## **Economic and Social Factors**

### **Economic problems**

Most analyses of ethnic conflict acknowledge the importance of poor economic conditions and the resultant struggle for scarce resources in the emergence of communal tensions. Lake and Rothchild, for example, have claimed that, ‘competition for resources typically lies at the heart of ethnic conflict.’<sup>65</sup> In many countries this competition manifests itself in disputes over arable land, water, natural resources and access to the wealth of the state itself. Brown has noted that almost all countries experience economic hardship at some stage and that few are therefore immune from the development of intra-state tensions.<sup>66</sup>

The impact of such pressures on the governments and institutions of developing states have been particularly profound. Crawford has noted that the causes of economic hardship in these states include scarcity of natural resources and poor infrastructure development but are magnified by corruption and rent-seeking behaviour at the highest levels of government.<sup>67</sup> She has also observed that such ‘economic factors not only affect the strength of institutions at the top within society, but they also directly create conditions at the bottom that make social groups receptive to the appeals of political entrepreneurs.’<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear*, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

### **Discriminatory economic systems**

States that possess discriminatory economic systems are also considered to be vulnerable to ethnic instability, regardless of their overall economic viability. Brown has claimed that systems that entrench 'unequal economic opportunities, unequal access to resources such as land and capital, and vast differences in standards of living' are bound to generate feelings of frustration that lead to violence.<sup>69</sup> Crawford agrees with these sentiments and argues that, 'economic discrimination and privilege on the basis of ascriptive criteria cause cultural identity to become politically relevant and intensify cultural identities that have already become politically charged.'<sup>70</sup>

### **Economic development and modernisation**

Attempts to address economic problems and to promote greater equality of opportunity through economic development and modernisation can in themselves lead to an increase in ethnic tension. Brown notes that economic development and industrialisation programs can result in migration and urbanisation that 'disrupt existing family and social systems and undermine traditional political institutions.'<sup>71</sup> Such efforts also raise 'economic and political expectations, and can lead to mounting frustration when these expectations are not met.'<sup>72</sup> These views are again shared by Crawford who observes that, 'cultural violence erupts most vociferously where secular economic decline, neoliberal economic reforms, and institutional transformation have broken old "social contracts".'<sup>73</sup>

### **Proximate causes**

A number of the suggested causes of ethnic conflict reviewed above have been considered sufficient explanation for the outbreak of hostilities between different groups. Many observers, however, believe that single, underlying factors may explain why some states are more prone to ethnic violence than others, but that they do not in themselves capture the reasons why members of ethnic groups chose to take part in hostilities. A number of scholars therefore continue to search for what they consider to be the 'catalysts' or 'triggers' for the eruption of actual violence.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Crawford, *The Causes of Cultural Conflict*, p. 37.

Kaufman believes that the answer lies in combining insights from several approaches to derive a more compelling case for causation. His explanation for why fighting emerges combines elements of the ‘ancient hatreds’, ‘economic rivalry’ and ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ theories.<sup>74</sup> This ‘ethnic symbolism’ model suggests that the mobilisation of ethnic groups to partake in violent behaviour relies on strong emotional attachments by individuals to their ethnic identity based on hostile feelings towards others, a perceived conflict of interest between ethnic groups and the organisational skills of ethnic entrepreneurs to facilitate violent action.<sup>75</sup>

Brown has also sought to identify the proximate causes of ethnic conflict. In similar manner to Kaufman, he accepts that a combination of underlying causes may provide the trigger for conflict.<sup>76</sup> He argues, however, that the primary catalyst for ethnic conflict is a series of rapid internal and external changes that impact adversely on a state’s internal equilibrium and which bring underlying factors to a head.<sup>77</sup>

Brown has identified four triggers for ethnic conflict that he has labelled as: bad domestic problems; bad neighbourhoods; bad neighbours; and bad leaders.<sup>78</sup> He argues that, ‘bad domestic problems’ are triggered by rapid changes to a state’s economic and political environment through factors such as economic development, modernisation of industry and financial arrangements and discrimination on political and economic grounds.<sup>79</sup> According to Brown, such changes, coupled with extant underlying factors such as ‘ancient hatreds’, were instrumental in the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka and the Punjab.<sup>80</sup> A second trigger labelled ‘bad neighbourhoods’, describes circumstances in which a state is thrown into turmoil and violence due to a sudden influx of refugees or armed groups that place pressure on internal resources and which actively spread feelings of discontent amongst local ethnic communities.<sup>81</sup> The civil war which erupted in Lebanon in 1975 is explained by Brown in these terms.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

The ‘bad neighbours’ trigger describes the actions of external elites who seek to destabilise the governments of neighbouring states by fomenting trouble between domestic ethnic groups.<sup>83</sup> Russian involvement in Georgia and Moldova in the 1990s is considered to be an example of this type of activity.<sup>84</sup> Finally, the label ‘bad leaders’ describes the many power struggles for political, economic, social and ideological control of the state undertaken by leaders and would-be leaders in countries as varied as Algeria, Georgia and Peru.<sup>85</sup> In all cases, attempts to obtain power have led to the outbreak of ethnic violence.

### **Conclusion**

An understanding of the factors that are essential to the formation of ethnic identity and the reasons why ethnic groups partake in violent conflict provides the basis for an analysis of internal conflict in Solomon Islands. The review of current literature on the causes of ethnic conflict has revealed that its emergence has been attributed to many factors. For some, ethnic violence is caused by ‘ancient hatreds’, ‘economic rivalry’ or internal ‘security dilemmas’. Others have attributed the outbreak of ethnic conflict to a combination of factors or to the impact of rapid changes to traditional societies and institutions. With the aid of this conceptual framework, subsequent chapters will examine the causes of the violent struggle between the IFM and MEF in the period 1998–2000. This analysis will seek to establish whether the factors examined above are also present in Solomon Islands and are supportive of claims that ethnicity has played a central role in the emergence of conflict in the country.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Brown, *The Causes of Internal Conflict*, p. 16.

## CHAPTER 3 BACKGROUND TO CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 provides the basis for an examination of the factors that led to the outbreak of violence in Solomon Islands in 1998. Drawing on the many underlying explanations for the emergence of ethnic conflict proposed by scholars, this chapter seeks to establish whether Solomon Islands possesses those characteristics conducive to the development of ethnic tensions and whether these factors are of sufficient consequence to have played a role in the eruption of violence between the IFM and MEF. This analysis reveals that the underlying causes of the conflict can in large measure be attributed to enduring colonial legacies and the impact of poor national leadership since independence. Political, economic and social problems deriving from the country's remote and more immediate past were central to the creation of a climate in which ethnic-based conflict became more probable in the late 1990s and are likely to remain the basis for future unrest unless remedial strategies are adopted.

### **Ethnic diversity**

In 1893, Britain annexed the many islands that would later form the modern state of Solomon Islands.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, it drew together for the first time numerous cultural and linguistic communities. The people of Solomon Islands speak between 70 and 80 different languages and inhabit approximately 1000 islands which stretch across 1800 kilometres from the Shortland Islands in the West to the islands of Temotu in the East.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of these peoples can broadly be described as Melanesian but many are ethnically distinct, possessing markedly different cultures, languages and social and economic forms of organisation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> JH Naitoro, 2000, 'Solomon Islands conflict: demands for historical rectification and restorative justice' (*Solomon Islands Conflict*), paper presented at the Pacific Updates on Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu in June 2000, Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management Update Papers, June, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> G A Finin and TA Wesley-Smith, 2000, *Coups, Conflicts, and Crises: The New Pacific Way (Coups, Conflicts and Crises)*, Pacific Islands Development Series Working Paper No.13, East-West Center, Honolulu, p. 7.

Awareness by indigenous peoples of the existence of other tribal and island groups and a consciousness of the differences between themselves and others existed on a localised level prior to the arrival of the British. Jourdan has noted, for example, that indigenous peoples in the pre-colonial period possessed an awareness of other ethnic groups ‘on the other side of the river or in the next valley, or on another island, with whom trade and exchange regularly took place, or against whom wars were fought.’<sup>4</sup> Liloqula and Pollard have also observed that the construction of separate ethnic identities had commenced in the period prior to European contact.<sup>5</sup>

It was the establishment of colonial rule, however, that provided a greater opportunity for indigenous groups to become aware of the existence of other, more distant cultural identities from across the archipelago and to confirm a sense of ethnic separateness. Church missions, trading posts and centres for colonial administration in coastal areas provided the meeting places for peoples from different areas to come in closer contact and to appreciate the differences that marked the boundaries of ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup> Alley has noted the importance of this period in the formation of ethnic consciousness in Solomon Islands by claiming that, ‘ethnic identity derives from the colonial experience.’<sup>7</sup>

### **Ethnic geography**

While the colonial experience increased awareness of cultural identity in Solomon Islands in ways anticipated by commentators such as Eriksen and Griffiths and O’Callaghan,<sup>8</sup> it also created the conditions in which members of different ethnic groups came into closer contact on a more permanent basis. To offset the costs of administration in the colony, administrators promoted plantation agriculture as a means of generating export income.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> C Jourdan, 1995, ‘Stepping-stones to National Consciousness: the Solomon Islands Case’ (*Stepping-stones*), in RJ Foster (ed.), *Nation Making: Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> R Liloqula and A A Pollard, 2000, ‘Understanding Conflict in Solomon Islands: A Practical Means to Peacemaking’ (*Understanding Conflict*), State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2000/07, Australian National University, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> M Jolly and N Thomas, 1992, ‘The Politics of Tradition in the Pacific’, *Oceania*, Vol.62, No.4, p. 242.; Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> R Alley, 2001, ‘Investigating Ethnicity and the International Dimensions of Conflict in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Bougainville’ (*Investigating Ethnicity*), paper presented to the International Studies Association Annual Convention, Chicago, 20–24 February, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter 2, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> JA Bennett, 1994, ‘Holland, Britain and Germany in Melanesia’ (*Tides of History*), in KR Howe, RC Kiste and BV Lal, (eds), *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, p. 62.

Plantations established for the production of copra and palm oil required sizeable work forces and necessitated active migration policies to ensure that appropriate supplies of labour were provided to those islands with suitable agricultural land. Labour was sourced largely from within the colony itself but involved the migration of indentured workers. Labour shortages on the most fertile island of Guadalcanal were addressed through the movement of workers from islands such as Makira and Santa Cruz but the majority of labourers came from the nearby island of Malaita which was the most populous but also one of the least developed parts of the archipelago.<sup>10</sup>

The migration of workers and their families to Guadalcanal continued in the period after World War II when the colony's capital was moved from Tulagi in the Florida Islands to the settlement of Honiara on the northern end of the island.<sup>11</sup> The employment opportunities in government departments and businesses in the new capital provided additional incentive to migrate to the island and helped swell the already increasing number of people arriving to seek jobs in areas such as the palm plantations of the Guadalcanal Plains.<sup>12</sup> Tarte and Kabutaulaka have noted that the majority of these settlers continued to be drawn to Guadalcanal from the island of Malaita and that, 'as Honiara grew, squatter settlements mushroomed, both within the town boundary on land under temporary occupancy license and on the customary land areas around the urban centre.'<sup>13</sup> Many of these settlements were established illegally and without the consent of traditional landowners.<sup>14</sup>

These migratory and settlement trends did not abate when Solomon Islands gained independence in 1978. The majority of new job opportunities in the country continued to be created in Honiara or areas close to the capital. The establishment of the Gold Ridge gold mine to the east of the capital in 1997, for example, provided new employment opportunities and new incentives for migration to Guadalcanal.<sup>15</sup> This free movement of peoples from their home islands to Guadalcanal is guaranteed by the constitution of Solomon Islands which grants all citizens the right to settle in any part of the country despite differences in language and custom.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> B Macdonald, 1982, 'Current Developments in the Pacific: Self-determination and self-government' (*Current Developments*), *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 31, 1–2, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 286.

<sup>13</sup> S Tarte and T Kabutaulaka, 2002, 'Rethinking Security in the South Pacific: Fiji and the Solomon Islands' (*Rethinking Security in the South Pacific*), in B Vaughn, (ed.), *The Unravelling of Island Asia?: Governmental, Communal, and Regional Instability*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> M O'Callaghan, 1999, 'The Other Battle for Guadalcanal' (*The Other Battle for Guadalcanal*), *The Australian*, June 25, <http://www.geocities.com/jannicolaas/1a0799.html> (Accessed 7 Aug 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Liloqula and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 6.

Successive governments have failed to address the social and cultural impacts of such population movements. Crocombe has noted that little effort has been made by leaders to facilitate cultural integration on Guadalcanal or to slow the rate of migration to levels that might assist the host culture's capacity to 'digest' new arrivals.<sup>17</sup> As a result of these and earlier trends, a large proportion of the permanent residents of Guadalcanal are now third generation Malaitan.<sup>18</sup>

The environment on Guadalcanal is therefore one in which indigenous Guales and a migrant group of predominantly Malaitan origin live in close proximity. As noted by Brown, such demographics have proven fertile ground for the development of ethnic-based animosities elsewhere<sup>19</sup> and it is this factor that is considered by some commentators to be an underlying cause of the conflict that erupted between the two groups in 1998. Fry, for example, has claimed that the demographic characteristics of Guadalcanal are particularly conducive to the development of 'us and them' politics and the competitive tensions that led to conflict during 1998–2000.<sup>20</sup> This view is shared by Reilly who considers that recent events in Solomon Islands derive in large measure from the fundamentals of ethnic geography and that conflict between 'established local populations and internal migrants from adjacent islands' is likely to become a more common occurrence in South Pacific countries.<sup>21</sup> The ethnic geography of Guadalcanal can thus be seen to form a base around which other underlying problems might come to be reflected and expressed.

### **Cultural and perceptual causes**

The demographics of Guadalcanal provide an environment in which tensions between different ethnic groups are more likely to emerge but they do not explain why Guales or Malaitans should perceive each other as competitors or engage in the type of violent conflict witnessed in 1998–2000. As noted in Chapter 2, a common explanation for the outbreak of hostilities between ethnic groups is the presence of long-standing animosities and negative mutual perceptions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> R Crocombe, (et al.), 2001, 'Security in Melanesia: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu' (*Security in Melanesia*), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 286.

<sup>19</sup> Chapter 2, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> G Fry, 2000, 'Political Legitimacy and the Post-colonial State in the Pacific: Reflections on Some Common Threats in Fiji and Solomon Islands Coups' (*Political Legitimacy and the Post-colonial state*), *Pacifica Review*, Volume 12, Number 3, October, p. 301.

<sup>21</sup> B Reilly, 2000, 'The Africanisation of the South Pacific', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, Issue 3, p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> Chapter 2, pp. 16–17.

It has also been demonstrated that the ‘primordialist’ thesis has been employed by a number of media commentators and government officials to explain the crisis in Solomon Islands.<sup>23</sup> Others, however, have rejected this approach and have questioned whether ethnicity was an underlying cause of the events of 1998–2000. Analysis of these contending approaches indicates that Guales and Malaitans did not hold the types of deep-rooted animosities possessed by ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia or Soviet Union prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Evidence does exist, however, which supports contentions that many Guales held negative perceptions of Malaitans and that these provided the bedrock upon which more substantive grievances might build.

Commentators such as Finin and Wesley-Smith have rejected the comparison of conflict in Solomon Islands with events in Europe and Africa in the 1990s, arguing that ‘while the use of violence to achieve political objectives may suggest parallels with other parts of the world, the problems confronting the Pacific Islands are rooted in a specific set of historical and contemporary circumstances.’<sup>24</sup> They have also observed that ‘the conflict has much more to do with the allocation of state resources than with any primordial cultural characteristics.’<sup>25</sup> The ‘primordialist’ thesis is also rejected by Dinnen who has observed that ‘the Solomon Islands crisis highlights the inadequacies of monocausal analyses of complex conflicts, as well as the essentially dynamic character of these conflicts.’<sup>26</sup> While acknowledging the important dimension of ethnicity in the conflict between Guales and Malaitans, he suggests that more prosaic factors such as competition among elites and divisions over resource distribution are more likely to have been the cause of the conflict.<sup>27</sup>

The most effective criticism of the ‘primordialist’ thesis, however, has been made by Kabutaulaka. While conceding that ethnicity should not be disregarded as a factor in the Solomon Islands’ crisis, he argues that attributing the conflict to longstanding hatreds between Guales and Malaitans is ‘a lazy shorthand explanation that divorces the crisis from contemporary socio-economic contexts.’<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Chapter 1, pp. 8–11.

<sup>24</sup> Finin and Wesley-Smith, *Coups, Conflicts and Crises*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 285.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 2.

Drawing on his own experiences as a native of Guadalcanal, he suggests that such accounts fail to acknowledge that most Guales and Malaitans have lived and interacted together peacefully on Guadalcanal both before and after independence and that there have been many marriages between the two groups.<sup>29</sup> He therefore questions whether the ethnic identities of ‘Guales’ and ‘Malaitans’ are as strong or as distinct as claimed by some commentators and argues that a commonly held consciousness of two separate and homogenous ethnic groups inhabiting the island of Guadalcanal only emerged during the conflict itself and soon abated once fighting ended.<sup>30</sup>

While these arguments make a compelling case for looking beyond simple ‘primordialist’ explanations of conflict, it is important to recognise that Guales and other ethnic groups from across the archipelago did hold negative cultural perceptions of Malaitans prior to the recent conflict. Bennett, for example, has noted that Malaitans, due in part to their large numbers and perceived dominance of plantation life during the colonial period, have generally been considered to be more aggressive and domineering than other ethnic groups.<sup>31</sup> Dureau has observed that these views continue to be held by the peoples of Western Province who draw on ‘stories about Malaitan labourers “getting out” and “stealing” from local gardens, “sneaking” on local girls and “beating up” local boys.’<sup>32</sup> Throughout much of Western Province, Malaitans are perceived as violent, dishonest and arrogant.<sup>33</sup>

More importantly, Guales themselves held perceptions of Malaitans as aggressive and disrespectful people well before the outbreak of violence in the late 1990s. While much of the disenchantment with the migrant group is associated with illegal occupancy of customary land and a perceived monopoly of job opportunities in and around Honiara,<sup>34</sup> there are also strong cultural aspects to these negative perceptions. Field has noted, for example, that prior to the outbreak of violence in 1998, many Guales were resentful of being dominated by ‘bossy and aggressive people from Malaita.’<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> C Dureau, 1988, ‘Decreed Affinities: Nationhood and the Western Solomon Islands’ (*Decreed Affinities*), *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol.33, No.2, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Discussed in more detail below.

<sup>35</sup> M Field, 1999, ‘Ethnic tension worsens in the Solomons’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, July, p.24.

The murder of Guales by Malaitans is also considered proof of the natural aggressiveness of the latter group. Frustrations with the perceived lack of interest by police in solving the celebrated ‘Mt Austin Murders’ case led many Guales in 1988 to request that the national government take a direct interest in the matter.<sup>36</sup> Even Kabutaulaka has recounted that, ‘we have problems with what we grew up to see as the arrogance of Malaitans and the idea that Malaitans can be dominant anywhere.’<sup>37</sup>

In addition to perceptions of aggressiveness and arrogance, Malaitans were seen as culturally insensitive and disrespectful of customs on Guadalcanal. Many Guales believe that Malaitans, as migrants, should observe local customs and traditions and refrain from practicing their own. Liloqla and Pollard have thus noted that for Guadalcanal people:

land is not the main issue but is used to draw attention to their real grievance: the imposition on them of another island’s traditions, customs and laws by settlers who use the national constitution to justify imposing their own ways and not respecting the customs and property of the host province.<sup>38</sup>

Added to this perceived affront are suspicions that Malaitans also practice forms of sorcery within their communities in Honiara and in surrounding settlements.<sup>39</sup>

None of these perceptions amount to the type of endemic hatreds held by participants in many ethnic conflicts elsewhere. Given that Guales and Malaitans have lived in close proximity for less than 100 years, suggestions that each group harbours ‘ancient animosities’ towards the other also appears difficult to sustain. Such perceptions are nevertheless important in helping to explain why Guales came to be mobilised along ethnic lines in 1998–2000.

<sup>36</sup> J Naitoro, 1999, quoted in, ‘Conflict in Guadalcanal?: A discussion of recent events in Solomon Islands by Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, John Naitoro and Joses Tuhanku’ (*Conflict in Guadalcanal*), State, Society and Governance Seminar, Australian National University, 13 May, <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/solomons2.htm> (Accessed 22 Aug 2003).

<sup>37</sup> T Kabutaulaka, 1999, quoted in *Conflict in Guadalcanal*.

<sup>38</sup> Liloqla and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 6

<sup>39</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 32.

## Political and Constitutional Causes

After almost 100 years as a colony of Britain, Solomon Islands gained full independence in 1978.<sup>40</sup> Unlike many post-colonial states that emerged from spirited campaigns for self-determination, the inhabitants of Solomon Islands were not active proponents of independence. Britain's decision to withdraw from its colonial possessions in the South Pacific was a response to international pressure to grant independence to colonial populations and the need to divest itself of costly responsibilities rather than a reaction to local autonomy movements.<sup>41</sup>

Decolonisation was implemented expeditiously. As late as the 1950s and early 1960s, many colonial administrators felt that independence for Solomon Islands was a remote prospect.<sup>42</sup> Where some form of autonomy was considered possible, the time required to prepare local peoples for roles of national leadership was reckoned in decades rather than in years.<sup>43</sup> A generation after this rush to independence, the political culture of the state and its constitutional structure are key elements in understanding why Solomon Islands remains a weak state that is susceptible to division.

### National consciousness

Perhaps the most telling colonial legacy for Solomon Islands was the failure of administrators to develop a common national consciousness strong enough to unite the country in the face of the many challenges that it would confront after independence. At the time of independence, national sentiment in Solomon Islands was largely non-existent. Work by colonial officials to instil a sense of national unity had been deficient. As O'Callaghan notes, 'at the time their colonial masters decided they should form a nation-state, little in the way of guidance, education, resources or capital was provided to the 300,000 people living on 1000 islands.'<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> S Firth, 2000, "'Postcolonial' Politics—Continuities and Discontinuities: Decolonization', in R Borofsky (ed.), *Remembrances of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p. 315.

<sup>41</sup> B Macdonald, 1994, 'Britain' (*Britain*), in KR Howe, RC Kiste and BV Lal, (eds), *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, *Tides of History*, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> Macdonald, *Current Developments*, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> M O'Callaghan, 2003, 'A nation unravels, unlike that first flag' (*A Nation Unravels*), *The Australian*, Monday, July 7, p. 14.

Where allegiances did exist, they were to local communities, clans or islands rather than to the nation. Primary identification by Solomon Islanders with these smaller organisational and ethnic units has continued since independence and has come at the expense of a broader national consciousness. Kabutaulaka has noted, for example, that ‘for many Solomon Islanders, national consciousness is often only skin deep: peel that off and you have a person with allegiances to a particular ‘wantok’ or ethnic group.’<sup>45</sup> Continuing loyalty to smaller communities has also been noted by Nanau who claims that ‘both national identity and provincial identity are rarely acknowledged’ and that ‘people continue to identify themselves at district or village level.’<sup>46</sup>

This environment has made the forging of a national identity based on shared values and traditions extremely difficult. Liloqula and Pollard have noted, for example, that ‘since we became one country, Solomon Islanders have yet to accept each other as one people.’<sup>47</sup> Others have suggested that the forging of a unifying national identity may never be fully achieved. The magnitude of this challenge was conceded by a former Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Solomon Mamaloni, who stated that, ‘Solomon Islands or the Solomon Islands Community has never been a nation and will never be a nation and will never become one.’<sup>48</sup> Such problems have added to the challenges of Guadalcanal’s ethnic geography.

### **Governance**

If the concept of a single national identity was unknown to the peoples of Solomon Islands, the Westminster system of government imposed on the newly independent state was also an alien construction. National- and provincial-level democratic processes have proven largely incompatible with traditional ‘big-man’ systems that bestow leadership at a more localised level to those who prove themselves to be industrious and able organisers capable of providing for the needs of villages or groups of hamlets.<sup>49</sup> Bennett has noted that many Solomon Islanders have chosen to cling to elements of these traditional systems in preference to the full Westminster model, which they perceive as ‘a foreign superstructure, not a product of their own efforts.’<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> G Nanau, 2002, ‘Uniting the fragments: Solomon Islands constitutional reforms’ (*Uniting the Fragments*), paper presented at Research Symposium on Development Research (South Pacific Futures), Brisbane, July 22–24, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Liloqula and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Nanau, *Uniting the Fragments*, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 7.

The mixing of traditions has resulted in a weak political system that has proven susceptible to fragmentation along parochial or ethnic lines. A key characteristic of politics has been the narrow focus of politicians (usually ‘big-men’) on personal enrichment and the needs of their local communities at the expense of national interests. Steeves has observed that many politicians seek to gain financially from office and that ongoing support from their constituents is almost entirely dependent on their ability to obtain funds and other benefits from central government for distribution amongst associates (wontoks) and relatives.<sup>51</sup> Crocombe has made similar findings, noting that politicians throughout Melanesia are subjected to ‘pressures to fulfil traditional obligations to kin and community over national interests.’<sup>52</sup>

The pursuit of personal and parochial gain ahead of the interests of the nation-state has resulted in the erosion of the party system and a general weakening of parliamentary democracy itself. Rather than acting as vehicles for debating issues of national importance and for the development of comprehensive national platforms, political parties represent loose coalitions of individuals who are continually manoeuvring to maximise opportunities to obtain the benefits of office.<sup>53</sup> They therefore possess short-term perspectives and are reluctant to commit themselves to solving difficult issues that may not satisfy the more immediate demands of their families and wontoks. As Alley has noted, ‘the political system offer[s] few rewards for tackling thankless problems of land reform and displacement compensation.’<sup>54</sup> Weak party loyalty and a willingness by parliamentarians to ‘cross the floor’ in support of their erstwhile political opponents in return for ministerial appointments have led to general instability. High turnover rates for governments have resulted in the inability of administrations to focus on longer-term issues.<sup>55</sup> It has been within this context that many Solomon Islanders have come to question the central government’s ability to solve the nation’s problems and to seek alternative avenues of support and redress of political grievance through affiliations to ethnic or regional connections.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> JS Steeves, 1996, ‘Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments’ (*Unbounded Politics*), *Pacific Studies*, Vol.19, No.1, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Steeves, *Unbounded Politics*, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> Alley, *Investigating Ethnicity*, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> R Crocombe, 2001, *The South Pacific (The South Pacific)*, University of the South Pacific, Suva, p.461; E Colbert, 1997, *The Pacific Islands: Paths to Present (The Pacific Islands)*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, pp. 66–68.

<sup>56</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 31.

### **Constitutional arrangements**

Disenchantment with the political process and the inability of elected national representatives to address important issues is best demonstrated in continuing calls by Solomon Islanders for greater regional autonomy and changes to the country's Constitution. Prior to independence, many local people questioned the suitability of constitutional arrangements proposed by the British which led to the establishment of Solomon Islands as a unitary state with a provincial-style parliamentary system.<sup>57</sup> Colonial administrators pushed strongly for the provincial system in the belief that the level of decentralisation that it promoted would give the many ethnic and geographic elements of Solomon Islands a sense of control over their own affairs and thus avoid the possibility of secession.<sup>58</sup> Many indigenous people, however, considered that the model gave too much power to the central government. People from Western Province and from Guadalcanal in particular, believed that only a federal system would give local assemblies the legislative powers necessary to control their own affairs and to determine the level of economic development that would proceed in each area.<sup>59</sup>

Calls for a review of the country's Constitution continued after independence and reflected concerns that extant arrangements did not permit provinces to address issues in their own way. The most vocal representations came from the people of Guadalcanal, who in 1978 made a submission to the national government for a review of the constitution and the prevailing system of government.<sup>60</sup> The widespread support for constitutional reform throughout much of Solomon Islands became more apparent in 1987 when a government commissioned Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) canvassed popular sentiment on the issue. As a result of this consultation, the CRC recommended the adoption of a federal system.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 10; and Colbert, *The Pacific Islands*, p. 44.

<sup>58</sup> T Kabutaulaka, 2000, 'The Guadalcanal Issue: A Frank Talk 1' (*The Guadalcanal Issue*), <http://www.geocities.com/jannicolaas/23a0699.html> (Accessed 7 Aug 2003), p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Tarte and Kabutaulaka, *Rethinking Security in the South Pacific*, p. 72.

<sup>60</sup> Nanau, *Uniting the Fragments*, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

The recommendation was given additional weight through the support of six provincial premiers whose views were contained in a petition to the central government. The petition clearly outlined their concern that extant constitutional arrangements would ultimately result in cultural disharmony within the country:

Geographically our provinces are separated by the sea and natural [sic] we will remain that way. Likewise, we are a multicultural society and we hoped to stay that way, rather than be alienated by more stronger forces, thus causing a disruption to our multicultural identity [sic] and creating animosity in our society. We do not need to look far to see for ourselves what is happening in other Pacific Territories. What we must now do is to recognise these cultural differences and learn to respect each other for our differences—not by way of alienation, or domination.<sup>62</sup>

Successive governments have failed to act on either the CRC's recommendation or the plea from the premiers. A renewed call from the people of Guadalcanal in 1988 to implement the CRC's findings was also ignored.<sup>63</sup> Nanau maintains that such responses failed to recognise the threat that the provincial system posed to the coexistence of distinct communities within Solomon Islands.<sup>64</sup> Commentators such as Alley and Otter have gone further, arguing that the outbreak of violence in 1998 was due in large measure to the failure of democratic processes to deal adequately with this issue and to provide a circuit-breaker for tensions.<sup>65</sup>

### **Economic Causes**

As observed in Chapter 2, poor economic conditions and the competition for resources have been important factors in the emergence of ethnic tensions in a number of countries.<sup>66</sup> It has also been noted that the impacts of these pressures on the governments and institutions of developing states have been particularly profound. As a developing country, Solomon Islands possesses many of the economic characteristics associated with the emergence of ethnic unrest. Its economy has a narrow base and is dependent on a small number of primary sector industries. Economic development and domestic wealth is distributed unevenly throughout the country and is seen to favour the interests of unscrupulous politicians and their supporters. The inability or unwillingness of national leaders to address these problems has led to an environment in which geographical and ethnic identities are perceived to be key determinants in obtaining access to the services and resources of the state.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Nanau, *Uniting the Fragments*, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Kabutaulaka, *The Guadalcanal Issue*, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Nanau, *Uniting the Fragments*, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Alley, *Investigating Ethnicity*, p. 11; Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Chapter 2, pp. 22–23.

### **Structural weaknesses and declining economic indicators**

The economic policies of the colonial period have left Solomon Islands with challenging legacies. The agricultural economy of Solomon Islands was a specialised element of Britain's trading empire but it was poorly suited to the needs of a newly independent state. Heavy reliance on the products of palm plantations as the basis of export revenues meant that efforts to develop other cash and staple crops were neglected. Where diversification did occur, it centred on other primary sector enterprises such as logging, mining and fishing which were usually foreign-owned.<sup>67</sup> Apart from these isolated examples, commitments to broader rural development were generally weak and disorganised and over 80 per cent of the rural economy remained devoted to subsistence agriculture.<sup>68</sup> Colonial administrators also failed to develop the secondary and tertiary sectors and were reluctant to invest in economic infrastructure.<sup>69</sup>

Since independence, leaders of Solomon Islands have done little to address the essentially one-dimensional nature of their country's economy. Investment in infrastructure and a commitment to developing new opportunities in the manufacturing or tourism industries has essentially been lacking. Investment in the skills of the people of Solomon Islands has also been deficient. Little attention was given to the development of human capital by colonial authorities and similar neglect by post-independence leaders saw standards of education deteriorate in the years leading up to the outbreak of violence in the late 1990s. According to Crocombe, school enrolments declined from 37 per cent to 35 per cent from the 1980s to the 1990s and a more marked decline in adult literacy was witnessed in the same period, with proficiency falling from 52 per cent to 35 per cent.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> JA Bennett, 1987, *Wealth of the Solomons: A history of a Pacific archipelago, 1800–1978* (*Wealth of the Solomons*), University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p. 330.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*; Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Macdonald, *Current Developments*, p. 57.

<sup>70</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 33.

The reliance of Solomon Islands on the primary sector as the major source of export income and employment opportunities has left it susceptible to falls in commodity prices and with limited capacity to weather economic downturns, despite receiving considerable foreign aid.<sup>71</sup> The country's natural resources have also failed to be managed in a way that is sustainable and likely to ensure that long-term benefits are returned to the community. Focusing on the country's logging industry, Liloqula and Pollard have noted that these natural resources should be the foundations of Solomon Islands' wealth and economic growth but that they have been mismanaged, with a large proportion having 'already been exhausted without contributing very much to sustainable community living and human development.'<sup>72</sup> Fono has viewed with concern the failure of successive governments to collect resource revenues from multinationals in a number of primary industries and has noted that government ministers and public servants have granted duty remissions in return for private financial payments.<sup>73</sup> These contentions are supported by Kabutaulaka who has noted that in the period 1995–1997 over S\$109 million in taxes was foregone in tax remissions on logging revenue alone.<sup>74</sup>

According to Liloqula and Pollard, such activities and the general mismanagement of public finances, have caused the country to 'fail to capture and invest an adequate share of the rent generated from the harvest of its natural endowment.'<sup>75</sup> Prior to the outbreak of violence, the impact of these practices and the absence of long-term investment had begun to be reflected in the economy of Solomon Islands. According to World Bank figures, the rate of economic growth in Solomon Islands had slowed to 0.1 per cent in 1998, having been regularly above 2.5 per cent in the preceding decade.<sup>76</sup> Kabutaulaka has noted that in this period, the government of Solomon Islands had accumulated debts in excess of its ability to repay and that by the end of 1997 had 'accumulated S\$1.2 billion in debt, more than double its 1998 budget.'<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>72</sup> Liloqula and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> F Fono, 2001, 'Solomon Islands: Current issues and Politics', State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Seminar, Australian National University, <http://rspas.anu.au/melanesia/PDF/FredFonotranscription.pdf> (Accessed 10 Jul 2003), p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Liloqula and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> World Bank, 'Solomon Islands at a glance', World Bank Country Data, [http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/slb\\_aag.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/slb_aag.pdf) (Accessed 31 Oct 2003).

<sup>77</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 15.

The decline in economic growth was exacerbated by a significant increase in the country's population. According to the 1999 census, the population of Solomon Islands had increased by 43 per cent since 1986, rising from 285,176 to 409,042.<sup>78</sup> Over 40 per cent of this population were aged under 15 years.<sup>79</sup> As Otter has noted, such population increases place pressure on infrastructure and on the demand for health and education services in particular, areas already suffering from considerable neglect.<sup>80</sup>

Declining economic growth and a rising population resulted in a large and increasing number of unemployed within Solomon Islands society. The 1999 Census showed that the island of Malaita, with 28 per cent of the adult population had only 3.5 per cent in paid work and that Honiara, with 14 per cent of the adult population had 6 per cent in paid employment.<sup>81</sup> Kabutaulaka has observed that despite these trends, governments had no employment creation policies to address the problem.<sup>82</sup> Duncan and Chand have noted that unemployed people in Solomon Islands 'do not have easy emigration to high-income countries', a situation which 'provides ample scope for the creation of grievances to back up the claim for the resources.'<sup>83</sup> Where people were being employed in Solomon Islands prior to the conflict, their average levels of income were declining and large disparities were becoming more evident. According to Crocombe, 'over 50% of income in Honiara before the recent ethnic tensions was owned by under 1% of households, many of them non-indigenous.'<sup>84</sup>

### **Discriminatory economic systems**

It was observed in Chapter 2 that states which possess discriminatory economic systems are vulnerable to internal instability.<sup>85</sup> The key characteristics of such systems include unequal economic opportunities and access to resources, and large variations in the standard of living experienced by citizens. Where economic privilege is perceived to depend on cultural identity or parochial connections, the probability of ethnic unrest normally increases. Many of the characteristics of discriminatory economic systems exist in Solomon Islands and help to explain why conflict emerged in the late 1990s.

<sup>78</sup> JM Fugui, 2001, 'Political Reviews—Melanesia, Solomon Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 551.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 50.

<sup>83</sup> R Duncan and S Chand, 2002, 'The Economics of the Arc of Instability' (*Arc of Instability*), *Asian-Pacific Economic Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 1, May, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 33.

<sup>85</sup> Chapter 2, p. 23.

It has already been noted that many politicians and government officials in Solomon Islands have readily succumbed to temptations to access the wealth of the state for personal use or for the benefit of their supporters. This inappropriate behaviour has manifested itself in numerous ways, including the receipt of personal payments from foreign companies in return for the granting of tax remissions and the redistribution of royalty payments and foreign development aid to politicians and their families.<sup>86</sup> There has also been inappropriate use of the Solomon Islands Parliamentarians Discretionary Fund which was designed to permit politicians to invest government funds in deserving local enterprises but which has, in many cases, been misappropriated by politicians themselves.<sup>87</sup> These activities have been made possible in the absence of appropriate review and accountability mechanisms and have contributed to a loss of respect for politicians, public officials and administrative bodies.<sup>88</sup> Such behaviour also accords with Crawford's assessment that corruption and rent seeking at the highest levels of government magnify economic hardship in many developing states.<sup>89</sup>

In addition to the corrupt practices of politicians and officials, there is also a perception that economic benefits are not being distributed evenly across the country. According to Fry, many Guales believe that they are not sharing in the wealth generated by the development and resource projects on their island.<sup>90</sup> Crocombe has noted that these perceptions are shared more broadly by Solomon Islanders across the archipelago who believe 'that to the extent that opportunities need to be concentrated, more action is needed to ensure that persons from areas with less opportunities can participate in ways that ensure long-term integration.'<sup>91</sup> These views are supported by evidence that Malaitan-dominated Honiara has been a net beneficiary of national wealth. According to Alley, Honiara enjoyed larger average incomes compared to rural areas of Guadalcanal and other parts of the country prior to the outbreak of violence.<sup>92</sup> Such marked variations in wealth and its distribution have proven fertile ground for tension in many countries.

<sup>86</sup> Liloqula and Pollard, *Understanding Conflict*, p. 4

<sup>87</sup> Crocombe, *The South Pacific*, p. 528.

<sup>88</sup> Duncan and Chand, *Arc of Instability*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Chapter 2, p. 23.

<sup>90</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy and the Post-colonial state*, p. 302.

<sup>91</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> Alley, *Investigating Ethnicity*, p. 9.

For a country in which employment opportunities are limited, access to government jobs is one of the key avenues for accessing the wealth and benefits of the state. It is in this field that Malaitans are also perceived to dominate. Alley has noted that overseas development assistance has ‘facilitated disproportionate public sector enlargement’ and that Malaitans have ‘exploited the continued opportunity for relatively stronger representation in better paid positions.’<sup>93</sup> This assessment is supported by Finin and Wesley-Smith who have observed that Malaitans have been the major beneficiaries of public service appointments and broader educational opportunities since the establishment of the capital in Honiara.<sup>94</sup> Malaitans have also continued to occupy a majority of positions in the Solomon Islands Police Force which has been seen by recent observers to be ‘almost fatally compromised by internal ethnic divisions.’<sup>95</sup> Successive governments have done little to ensure that these institutions represent a more balanced cross-section of peoples from across the country.<sup>96</sup>

Beyond the public sector, Malaitans are also perceived to control the majority of job opportunities on Guadalcanal. Naitoro has noted, for example, that prior to the outbreak of violence, over 50 per cent of workers at the Commonwealth Corporation (CDC) Oil Palm Plantation Company were Malaitan.<sup>97</sup> Such job opportunities have once again been seen to come at the expense of Guales. Alley has claimed that such zero sum calculations stoked ethnic differences on Guadalcanal as competition for limited resources escalated.<sup>98</sup>

The ownership and use of land has also been an important and largely divisive economic factor on Guadalcanal. While it has avoided the entrenched social and economic divisions experienced in other states such as Fiji, Solomon Islands has nevertheless witnessed an increasing number of land disputes between different ethnic groups. Legal impediments to the sale of indigenous lands were implemented by colonial authorities to protect the subsistence lifestyles of indigenous inhabitants, but these were targeted against European speculators rather than other local peoples.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> Finin and Wesley-Smith, *Coups, Conflicts and Crises*, p. 12.

<sup>95</sup> A Makim, 2003, ‘A state in waiting’ (*A state in waiting*), *The Diplomat*, Aug–Sep, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> Finin and Wesley-Smith, *Coups, Conflicts and Crises*, p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> Naitoro, *Conflict in Guadalcanal*, p. 1

<sup>98</sup> Alley, *Investigating Ethnicity*, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Bennett, *Tides of History*, p. 59.

As noted above, many Malaitans have constructed settlements on Guadalcanal either without the authority of traditional landowners or as a result of purchasing lands from older Guales. Such land transactions have caused considerable resentment amongst the younger generation of Guales who have largely chosen to direct their anger towards Malaitans.<sup>100</sup> Malaitans who have purchased land legally or who have Guale wives, who have inherited it through matrilineal descent, strongly object to these claims.<sup>101</sup> The failure of successive governments to clarify the legal status of customary land and to undertake a comprehensive survey of land ownership on Guadalcanal have permitted these grievances to develop and to provide yet another opportunity for ethnic competition to develop.<sup>102</sup>

Guale land grievances also relate to government and private sector use of customary lands. It has already been observed that there is general dissatisfaction amongst Guales regarding their lack of access to the financial benefits accrued from what they consider to be their traditional lands. Large companies located on Guadalcanal such as the Solomon Islands Plantations Ltd and the Gold Ridge gold mine are perceived to deliver benefits to foreigners or other indigenous groups while providing little financial return to locals. There is also a widespread belief amongst Guales that they were not consulted prior to the establishment of the capital on Guadalacanal and that adequate compensation was never received from the colonial or post-independence governments for the use of customary lands upon which Honiara is situated.<sup>103</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Enduring colonial legacies and poor national leadership since independence have created an environment in Solomon Islands that is conducive to the emergence of ethnic conflict. Decisions by colonial administrators on matters such as migration, economic development and the constitutional arrangements for the new state would prove conducive to the development of communal tensions and 'us and them' politics. The unwillingness of successive post-independence governments to address these problems and to create an environment in which all Solomon Islanders believed that they had an equal stake in the fortunes of the state, made the country increasingly susceptible to the outbreak of ethnic conflict. These problems provided the background to the eruption of violence in the late 1990s and will remain important factors in the future of Solomon Islands that require greater understanding if stability is to be assured.

<sup>100</sup> Finin and Wesley-Smith, *Coups, Conflicts and Crises*, p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy and the Post-colonial state*, p. 302.

<sup>102</sup> Kabutaulaka, quoted in *Conflict in Guadalcanal*.

<sup>103</sup> Kabutaulaka, *The Guadalcanal Issue*, p. 5.

## CHAPTER 4 CATALYSTS OF CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

The previous chapter established that Solomon Islands possesses many of the characteristics conducive to the development of ethnic tensions and that these were of sufficient consequence to have created an environment in which the eruption of violence in the late 1990s became more likely. It has also been noted, however, that many observers of ethnic hostilities believe that such underlying factors do not in themselves ignite actual conflict. Using the conceptual frameworks of Kaufman and Brown as a basis,<sup>1</sup> this chapter examines those factors which may have acted as catalysts in the outbreak of violence on Guadalcanal. This analysis reveals that conflict was most likely sparked by the convergence of multiple underlying causes and as a result of elite politics, emerging security dilemmas and external political factors. In almost every case, these proximate causes were closely related to ethnic and parochial issues.

### **Convergence of underlying causes**

As shown in Chapter 2, a number of analysts of ethnic tension believe that the outbreak of conflict between groups only occurs when there is a convergence of underlying causes, which together, serve as a catalyst for violent actions. Kaufman, for instance, has argued that ethnic conflict is more likely to emerge where there is a confluence of negative perceptual factors, perceived conflicts of interest and where ethnic entrepreneurs facilitate violent action. Determining whether this combination of factors, or indeed other sets of underlying causes such as being in a 'bad neighbourhood' or the effects of the 'security dilemma' at the societal level, were central to the outbreak of violence in Solomon Islands, is a difficult task. Answers to such questions must rely in large measure on efforts to understand the motives of those who took part in militant activity.

A thorough account of events on Guadalcanal in 1998–2000 is still to emerge and an appreciation of the reasons why many Gualales and Malaitans resorted to violence remains open to conjecture. Some insights into the motivations of participants have, however, been provided in short interviews and accounts given by combatants.

<sup>1</sup> References to Kaufman and Brown throughout this chapter draw on Chapter 2, pp. 24–25.

To date, one of the most detailed of these has been by George Gray, a former local leader and secretary of the IFM and nephew of notorious warlord, Harold Keke. In a paper presented to the Australian Anthropological Society Annual Conference in 2002, Gray gave his reasons for leaving a promising career in an engineering company to take up arms with the IFM.<sup>2</sup> He situated the conflict in personal terms, claiming that:

It was not as though I joined the group entirely for the sake of having fun or some teenage excitement. I joined because I believed that Guadalcanal and her people had, for a long time, been unfairly treated in the name of constructing this nation-state called Solomon Islands. This was evident in the way in which revenues were distributed, development projects were planned, and the control that people from other islands impose upon us and our island. However, the most important issue that inspired me to join the Guadalcanal militancy was what I perceived as the disrespect that settlers (especially Malaitans) had towards our people and our land. Since independence our people have been murdered, our cultural sites desecrated, our land settled without permission and our people have been treated as second-class citizens in the capital city, which is located on our island. I had seen these things since I was a kid and they offended me. It is true that some people did acquire land legally or through customary means. But, there were also many who never did this and still settled and have over the years wanted to become dominant on our island.<sup>3</sup>

These comments indicate that for Gray, the decision to join the IFM was based on a strong sense of grievance related to unresolved issues on Guadalcanal. These issues essentially equate to the same underlying causes identified in the preceding chapter, including: perceptions of Malaitans as aggressive and disrespectful of the culture of others; an economic climate in which competition for scarce resources is perceived to favour some ethnic identities over others; and a political system that rewards allegiance to ethnic and geographical identities. Of significance is the fact that Gray cites the aggregation of such a large number of grievances as the basis of his actions.

<sup>2</sup> G Gray, 2002, 'Habuna Momruqu (The Blood of My Island)—Violence and the Guadalcanal Uprising in Solomon Islands' (*The Blood of My Island*), paper presented at the Anthropology and Diversity: Disciplinary and Practice Perspectives, Australian Anthropological Society Annual Conference 2002, 3–5 October, Australian National University SSGM Organised Session: Pacific Anthropology/Pacific Diversity, <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/RTF/Tanis-Gray.rtf> (Accessed 1 Aug 2003), p.3.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

It is also important to note that these concerns were underlaid by strong feelings of animosity towards Malaitans. Gray's paper made explicit the aim of chasing settlers, especially Malaitans, from Guadalcanal.<sup>4</sup> In an earlier interview with journalists in August 1999, he also referred to Malaitans as 'dog's sperm' and suggested that it would be very easy to wipe out all Malaitans in Honiara in three hours.<sup>5</sup> He went on to claim that Guales were fighting a holy war against Malaitans in which 'the trees are fighting, the stones are fighting, and the women and the children are fighting.'<sup>6</sup>

Many of the elements of Kaufman's thesis, including the confluence of negative perceptual factors and perceived conflicts of interest, are clearly present in the pronouncements made by Gray. This suggests that the aggregation of underlying causes and the development of a 'last straw' syndrome may have played a significant role in the decision by Guales to commence hostilities in 1998. Such an assessment appears to be supported by views expressed in 1999 by the head of the Catholic Archdiocese of Honiara, Archbishop Adrian Smith. Speaking at the height of hostilities, Smith claimed that 'the reserve of the Guadalcanal people is such that they accepted being kept down for a long time' but that they were 'fighting back for their identity.'<sup>7</sup>

These views also coincide with comments made by William Nathan, a primary school teacher who joined the IFM in June 1999. When questioned why he was involved in the fighting, he claimed that 'we are not against the Malaitans—but we have had enough because they don't treat us well the way they steal our land.'<sup>8</sup> He added that: 'we don't want to fight, but we will because when we tell them "go from our island" they are very stubborn people.'<sup>9</sup> The motives of Guales were further reflected in the 'Bona fide demands of the indigenous people of Guadalcanal', a list of grievances that was presented to the central government in January 1999. As Dinnen has noted, these 'included rent for the use of Honiara as the national capital, compensation for local people killed by settlers, plus restrictions on citizens from other provinces owning land on Guadalcanal.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> M Field, 1999, 'Fragile peace for Solomons', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, August, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in L Clausen, 1999, 'Strife in the Happy Isles', *Time Magazine*, 28 June, text reprinted in 'Civil Unrest on the Island of Guadalcanal Solomon Islands: Collected primary and secondary source documents for the period 1998–1999' (*Civil Unrest on the Island of Guadalcanal*), <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/Harbor/2946/sources.html> (Accessed 7 May 2003), p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> P Daley, 1999, 'Guadalcanal war relics haunt new conflict', *The Age*, 23 June, text reprinted in *Civil Unrest on the Island of Guadalcanal*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 286.

### **‘Bad leaders’—ethnic entrepreneurs**

The role of ethnic entrepreneurs or what Brown has referred to as the ‘bad leaders’ trigger of ethnic conflict also has pertinence to Solomon Islands. Although it is difficult to identify any leaders in the conflict that played an active role in fomenting unrest commensurate to those of Slobadan Milosevic or Franjo Tudjman in the former Yugoslavia, the public speeches and actions of several leaders in Solomon Islands may have provided the catalyst for grievances to materialise into more direct action. Resentments held by both Guales and Malaitans came to be expressed by leaders who have been described as ‘self-serving and manipulative’<sup>11</sup> and which arguably stood to profit politically from aligning themselves to the respective causes.

Many commentators have questioned whether the decision by men on Guadalcanal to take up arms in December 1998 was influenced by the public comments of the Premier of Guadalcanal, Ezekiel Alebua in late November. In a speech given at a ceremony in which the national government returned alienated traditional lands to Guadalcanal Province, Alebua made a number of demands, including: the payment of rent to Guadalcanal for use of Honiara as the national capital; compensation for Guadalcanal people murdered in Honiara; and increased respect to be shown to Guales by settlers from other provinces.<sup>12</sup> He also claimed that the patience of people on Guadalcanal was running out and that rapid solutions were required. Notwithstanding that he had rejected similar demands when Prime Minister in 1988, Alebua appeared to be seeking to improve his rapport with the people of Guadalcanal by aligning himself with their grievances.<sup>13</sup> Outspoken demands by the leader of the province may have tipped the balance towards militant action.

<sup>11</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy*, p. 301.

<sup>12</sup> PACNEWS, 1999, ‘Guadalcanal demands million in compensation from national government’, December 1, text reprinted in *Civil Unrest on the Island of Guadalcanal*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Gray, *The Blood of My Island*, p. 8.

Andrew Nori, a lawyer and former politician described variously as ‘leader’, ‘front-man’, ‘spokesman’ and ‘legal adviser’ to the MEF, also appears to have played a central role in the development of Malaitan militancy and the decision by the MEF and elements of the Solomon Islands Police Force to overthrow the Ulufa’alu Government in the coup of 2000.<sup>14</sup> According to Nori, the coup did not represent a move against the Constitution but merely an attempt to resolve the conflict between Guales and Malaitans and to seek justice for those who had suffered at the hands of IFM militants, but these claims must be considered in the light of his threats of ‘all-out war’ if parliament failed to elect a new leader to the MEF’s liking.<sup>15</sup> Nori’s motives appear to have been largely self-interested with a number of commentators suggesting that he was seeking to establish a support base amongst Malaitans to challenge for a place in parliament and leadership of the country at a later stage.<sup>16</sup>

### **‘Bad domestic problems’—The Ulufa’alu reforms**

Ethnic conflict is also considered to be triggered by rapid changes to a state’s economic and political environment through factors such as economic development and modernisation of industry and financial arrangements. Similar factors may also have been important in the outbreak of violence and the removal of the Ulufa’alu Government. Attempts by the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) government headed by Bartholomew Ulufa’alu to solve a number of Solomon Islands’ economic problems probably served to increase tensions at the elite level within the country.

The election of the Ulufa’alu Government in 1997 was viewed by many Solomon Islanders as an opportunity to tackle the problems facing the country. According to Bennett, the government ‘faced a sick economy; its parlous condition made worse in 1997 by the Asian economic crisis.’<sup>17</sup> Other problems included high aide dependency, growing unemployment and a reducing level of government services.<sup>18</sup> To solve these problems, Ulufa’alu commenced a comprehensive reform agenda which was endorsed by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Asia Development Bank.<sup>19</sup> Changes included the cancellation of duty remissions and the rationalisation of the tax regime to increase government revenues.<sup>20</sup> Other reforms included a reduction in the size of the public sector and the privatisation of government interests.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy*, p. 295.; Alley, *Investigating Ethnicity*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy*, p. 300.

<sup>16</sup> B Bohane, 2003, ‘Song of the islands’, *The Bulletin*, September 2, pp. 26–27.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Makim, *A state in waiting*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 287.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 10.

It was these reforms which ultimately caused greater pressures on those which had vested interests in the status quo. As Dinnen notes, ‘the government’s reform agenda met with considerable resistance among elements of the political elite, particularly among those who had benefited most from the tax regulatory regimes espoused by previous administrations.’<sup>22</sup> Fry has also noted that ‘the Ulufa’alu Government was introducing anti-corruption regulations which would have upset established business connections.’<sup>23</sup> Given these opposing forces, the government’s position was precarious and according to Bennett, ‘a small push saw it fall.’<sup>24</sup>

### **‘Bad neighbourhoods’—Bougainville and Fiji**

Brown has contended that a number of countries have descended into disorder and ethnic conflict as a result of unrest in bordering or regional states. This ‘bad neighbourhoods’ thesis suggests that the influx of refugees or armed groups from neighbouring states can play an active role in spreading feelings of discontent amongst local populations. The arrival of refugees to Solomon Islands from the conflict on Bougainville and the models provided by the coups in Fiji, are likely to have acted as similar catalysts for the emergence and development of conflict on Guadalcanal.

The secessionist conflict on Bougainville in Papua New Guinea in the 1990s is considered by several commentators to be an important contributing factor in the events that would later unfold in Solomon Islands. Crocombe, for example, believes that the arrival in Western Solomons and Guadalcanal of 9000 refugees—many of them members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA)—provided Guales with both the means and the motive to take similar action.<sup>25</sup> Refugees were the source of first hand experience in how to conduct military-style operations and provided a model for how to achieve victory against an immigrant population.<sup>26</sup> Otter has also noted that the IFM may have had close associations with BRA members and that there are suggestions ‘that BRA members trained IFM members in the making of home-made guns as well as told stories about how they had driven out the dreaded ‘red skins’ (PNG highlanders) from Bougainville.’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Dinnen, *Winners and Losers*, p. 287.

<sup>23</sup> Fry, *Political Legitimacy*, p. 302.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, *Roots of Conflict*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, pp. 11–12.

The success of coups mounted by indigenous Fijians against elected governments in 1987 and in 2000 also provided models for violent action which may have influenced both Guales and Malaitans involved in the conflict on Guadalcanal. The coups led by Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987 against a government that was seen to be dominated by non-indigenous, Indo-Fijians were supported by most indigenous Fijians who believed that their traditional rights were being overridden by immigrants.<sup>28</sup> The success of this direct action by indigenous peoples may have influenced some Guadalcanal militants to take up arms in 1998. Conversely, the overthrow of the Fijian Government of Mahendra Chaudhry on 19 May 2000 by George Speight and his armed followers<sup>29</sup> provided Andrew Nori with the inspiration to remove the government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu on 5 June 2000.<sup>30</sup>

### Security dilemmas

It was noted in Chapter 2 that weak states are normally unable to provide a comprehensive security environment within their borders.<sup>31</sup> It was also revealed that where groups fear for their safety and the future, potentially destructive security dilemmas arise. While the security environment in Solomon Islands did not suffer a breakdown on the scale witnessed in countries like Rwanda, it did display many of the features of the 'emerging anarchy' described by Posen<sup>32</sup> and these became more pronounced as the conflict itself progressed. The effective control of SIPF by ethnic Malaitans and its perceived reluctance to investigate crimes believed to have been committed by Malaitans against Guales, meant that many people on Guadalcanal had begun to question the state's commitment and ability to guarantee their security well before the outbreak of hostilities. As noted earlier, these doubts were expressed in submissions to the central government regarding the Mt Austin Murders case and Guales would also demonstrate them in the stockpiling of weapons in the years prior to the conflict.<sup>33</sup> The development of an environment in which the people of Guadalcanal felt that their safety from Malaitan dominance rested in their own hands meant that violent conflict became inevitable. Once the conflict commenced and the SIPF confirmed its strong pro-Malaitan bias, these fears were both confirmed and strengthened.

<sup>28</sup> S Tarte and Kabutaulaka, *Rethinking Security in the South Pacific*, p. 65.

<sup>29</sup> Von Strokirch, *The Region in Review*, p. 512; R Robertson and A Tamanisau, 1988, *Fiji: Shattered Coups*, Pluto Press, Leichardt, NSW, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Chapter 2, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 3.

If Malaitans did not hold collective fears for their security prior to 1998, the deaths of a number of their kinsmen at the hands of the IFM and the forced evacuation of thousands more from Guadalcanal, quickly changed these perceptions. The successful operations of the IFM on Guadalcanal led many Malaitans to also question the state's ability to control the security environment. In response to these concerns, the MEF was established initially by the family members of those who has suffered at the hands of the IFM and who lacked faith in the SIPF's capacity to guarantee their safety.<sup>34</sup>

Once Guales and Malaitans developed mutual fears for their safety, such feelings proved difficult to control. Anxieties were fuelled by rumours of the increasing military capacities of each group. Guales were said to be receiving arms from Bougainville and boatloads of Malaitans were reported to be arriving in Honiara to be equipped by the SIPF.<sup>35</sup> The large numbers of young and unemployed men available to both groups added to perceptions of the threat. Use of the two-way radio network by each side to direct taunts at the other also heightened the pervading sense of threat and acted as a counter to numerous attempts at a lasting cease-fire.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The task of identifying the proximate causes of ethnic conflict is an extremely difficult one. Efforts to identify the spark that ignited ethnic conflict in Solomon Islands are unlikely to reveal the definitive cause of the outbreak of violence. Analysis has revealed, however, that the convergence of numerous underlying causes, coupled with the influences of elite politics, external political factors and emerging security dilemmas were the likely catalysts for conflict. Like the underlying causes of conflict previously identified, almost all of the proximate causes reviewed demonstrate the centrality of ethnic or parochial interests in the political, social and economic life of Solomon Islands.

<sup>34</sup> Otter, *Development Planning for a Divided Society*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Clausen, *Civil Unrest on the Island of Guadalcanal*, p. 92.

<sup>36</sup> Naitoro, *Solomon Islands Conflict*, p. 2.

## CHAPTER 5 FUTURE PROSPECTS AND SOLUTIONS

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that the conflict on Guadalcanal in 1998–2000 was caused by a range of underlying and proximate factors in which ethnic and parochial interests played a central role. While ethnic tensions had degenerated into more general forms of lawlessness prior to the implementation of OPERATION HELPEM FREN and no longer manifest themselves in outward signs of animosity between Guales and Malaitans, most of the issues that led to the outbreak of violence remain important factors in the political, social and economic life of Solomon Islands. The loss of many lives and the destruction of property during the conflict have also created new and arguably more difficult challenges for the peaceful coexistence of Guales and Malaitans as many seek to recover from the traumatic events that they have experienced. Addressing these problems will require considerable time and the commitment of all Solomon Islanders. There are a number of ways that Australia can provide assistance in meeting these challenges.

### **Ethnic conflict—a continuing threat**

Solomon Islands in late 2003 possesses many of the cultural, structural, political and economic characteristics that exacerbated tensions and led to the outbreak of ethnic conflict in 1998. Solomon Islanders continue to search for a shared national consciousness and a political culture that focuses on national issues rather than on the personal interests of politicians and their supporters. The appropriateness of the country's constitutional arrangements is the subject of considerable on-going discussion, with repeated calls for the adoption of a federal system. Uneven economic development remains a divisive factor, as do unresolved issues related to the ownership and use of land on Guadalcanal. These problems continue to provide an environment in which ethnic conflict might once again emerge within the next ten years.

The events of 1998–2000 have also created new problems. Where Guales and Malaitans held negative perceptions of each other prior to the outbreak of conflict, many of these were based on isolated historical incidents, perceived cultural insults and random cases of unorganised violence. The personal injury and loss suffered by many Solomon Islanders in 1998–2000, however, means that a large number now harbour more bitter animosities towards their neighbours. Van Evera has observed that such fresh and vivid memories of violence pose a particular danger to the on-going stability of states recovering from ethnic conflict.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S Van Evera, 1997, 'Hypotheses on Nationalism and War', in ME Brown and OR Cote (et al.), 1997, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 62.

This assessment is supported by George Gray who has observed that high levels of distrust now exist between former IFM and MEF combatants and that many continue to feel insecure.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence from other ethnic conflicts indicates that Solomon Islands is unlikely to recover completely from the events of 1998–2000. Many observers of ethnic conflict believe that once states have experienced violence the requirement to guard against its return is on-going. Lake and Rothchild, for example, argue that the management of ethnic tension is a continuous and imperfect process that, ‘no matter how well-conducted, leaves some potential for violence in nearly all multi-ethnic polities.’<sup>3</sup> These views are shared by de Nevers who has noted that:

Recent history has shown that ethnic conflict can be resolved through forced expulsion and genocide. Yet, short of these morally repugnant options, as long as different groups continue to cohabit states, the potential for ethnic conflict remains.<sup>4</sup>

Solomon Islands therefore remains susceptible to the re-emergence of ethnic conflict and requires effective remedial strategies to reduce the likelihood and severity of its recurrence.

### **Reducing the Likelihood of Renewed Ethnic Conflict**

As noted in Chapter 1, the Australian Government has indicated its long-term commitment to assisting Solomon Islands become a viable state. Achievement of this goal will depend in large measure on the development and implementation of strategies that address those factors that exacerbate ethnic tension. It will also rely on programs that assist Solomon Islanders to deal with the memories and the longer-term impacts of violence on Guadalcanal. The remainder of this chapter considers a range of strategies that, if implemented with Australian support, should reduce the opportunities for ethnicity to play a destabilising role in Solomon Islands society in future years.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, *The Blood of My Island*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Lake and Rothchild, *Containing Fear*, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> R de Nevers, 1993, ‘Democratization and Ethnic Conflict’, in ME Brown, (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 62.

### Constitutional reform

It was demonstrated in Chapter 3 that frustration with the perceived inadequacies of the Solomon Islands' provincial system of government was an important underlying factor in the outbreak of violence in 1998.<sup>5</sup> Many Solomon Islanders continue to see the adoption of a federal system of government as a positive step towards permitting people to address local and provincial issues in accordance with their own traditions and customs. It is also perceived as a bulwark against the decisions of an intrusive central government motivated by personal and parochial interests. Greater autonomy in the development of legislation and a more equal partnership with the national government in formulating strategies for the development of natural resources and distribution of national wealth is considered by many to be a vital means of avoiding ethnic and parochial tensions in future.<sup>6</sup>

The adoption of a federal system of government was being actively considered by the Ulufa'alu Government prior to its overthrow and its successors have also shown an interest in constitutional reform.<sup>7</sup> Solomon Islands has been assisted in this regard by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that has established a small team to advise on decentralisation and to help fast-track constitutional reform.<sup>8</sup> According to one of the UNDP's representatives, wide consultation with Solomon Islanders from across the archipelago indicates a strong desire for a federal system and that these views need to be taken seriously.<sup>9</sup>

While there is much enthusiasm for constitutional change, there are also problems associated with this approach. Malaitans are less inclined to abandon current arrangements, believing that strong central government continues to guarantee them access to nation's wealth despite their own island's lack of natural resources.<sup>10</sup> The strengthening of provincial governments at the expense of the centre is also seen by some as potentially destabilising and contrary to the development of a unifying national consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the Australian Government appears to favour the retention of the current system on the basis that federal arrangements are extremely inefficient and costly to run.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Chapter 3, pp. 37–38.

<sup>6</sup> Nanau, *Uniting the Fragments*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bohane, *Song of the Islands*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Bohane, *Song of the Islands*, p. 27.

Notwithstanding these concerns, a failure to address calls for a federal system risks future instability and possible secessionist attempts. Considerable work is therefore required to develop a system that is seen to respond to grass roots concerns but which is also as efficient and effective as possible. Despite its misgivings regarding such an approach, it is in Australia's interests to assist Solomon Islands to reform its machinery of government successfully. It has a lot to bring to this task, including its own experience at both the national and state level in managing a federal system of government.

### **Uneven economic development**

Closely related to the issue of constitutional reform and the decentralisation of government is the need to address uneven development. It was noted in Chapter 3 that the conflict on Guadalcanal was caused in part by the concentration of employment opportunities on the island, that had in turn created a problematic ethnic geography and perceptions that a select group were benefiting from the nation's wealth.<sup>13</sup> Addressing these problems will require considerable planning expertise and capital investment but it is another area in which Australia is well placed to help.

One approach might be to support basic infrastructure projects and targeted development schemes in provinces other than Guadalcanal, with particular attention being paid to Malaita. This would help reduce population pressures in northern and eastern Guadalcanal and would also allay Malaitan concerns that the province would be the net loser from the introduction of a federal system. Kabutaulaka has suggested that investment in 'facilities and infrastructure such as roads, houses, classrooms, clinics and hospitals would attract highly qualified and trained personnel back to the rural areas, to implement development strategies that would create economic opportunities and access to industrial outlets for rural youth.'<sup>14</sup> All of these approaches to development require careful planning and considerable capital investment. Targeted contributions by Australia, perhaps focusing on the development of educational and health facilities in the provinces, would be a useful beginning.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3, pp. 28–30, 4–44.

<sup>14</sup> Kabutaulaka, *Beyond Ethnicity*, p. 5.

### **National consciousness**

It has also been noted that the absence of a common national consciousness strong enough to override loyalties to ethnic and geographical connections was a contributing factor in the outbreak of ethnic conflict in 1998.<sup>15</sup> Creating popular allegiance to a national entity that had no precedent prior to the arrival of the British is indeed a difficult task. Assisting the Solomon Islands to achieve such a goal, however, must also be an important component of Australia's strategy to restore ongoing stability to its Pacific neighbour.

One way that Australia could contribute to this process is to fund training programs that promote the wider dissemination of a common and readily understood language for all Solomon Islanders. Communication between the peoples of Solomon Islands is hampered by the existence of 70-odd different language groups, preventing the free exchange of ideas and opinions. While noting the importance of English throughout the archipelago, Jourdan has advocated the further development and adoption of Solomon Islands Pijin as a way of overcoming these problems. She has argued that Pijin has the potential to be the means by which political messages are conveyed more effectively to the whole country and that as a unifying tool it has three advantages:

(1) it prevents any ethnic rivalry that could stem from one vernacular becoming too visible and important in the country; (2) it is a local alternative to English in a country trying to shake free from its colonial heritage; and (3) being closely mapped onto vernaculars, it is learned quickly by Solomon Islanders.<sup>16</sup>

Funding for increased training in Pijin may be an inexpensive way for Australia to assist Solomon Islands develop a greater sense of national unity.

Australia could also provide support for the development of programs that increase cultural awareness within Solomon Islands society. Crocombe has noted that efforts by primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions to create greater cultural understanding have been deficient, with an overemphasis having been given to academic and technical proficiency at the expense of wider social issues.<sup>17</sup> Such programs, if handled appropriately, could be an effective way to demonstrate that different ethnic groups possess unique and valuable cultural traditions and customs and that none are inherently violent or domineering.

<sup>15</sup> Chapter 3, pp. 34–35.

<sup>16</sup> Jourdan, *Stepping-stones*, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 20.

National consciousness would also be supported by the proposals for economic development mentioned above. Creation of basic infrastructure such as road networks and the provision of greater access to government services for those living in remote areas would facilitate communication and trade and provide people with a greater sense of connectedness with the state. As Duncan and Chand have noted, ‘increased interdependence across the country through increased trade will enhance positive feelings towards a nation state and make it difficult for local leaders to create grievances against other regions in order to gain control over resources.’<sup>18</sup>

### **Land reform**

The ownership and use of land on Guadalcanal was also one of the key issues which troubled Guales prior to the conflict and it remains a largely unresolved problem. Many of the disputes between the indigenous people of Guadalcanal and settlers and large commercial enterprises arose because of imprecise and largely verbal agreements associated with the transfer and use of land.<sup>19</sup> These can only be addressed through the survey and registration of customary and potentially productive land and the codification of arrangements for its sale and lease. Registration of land would provide owners, both Guales and those settlers who have acquired it legally from traditional occupants, with security and would give those leasing land the confidence required to invest in appropriate infrastructure.

Conducting an appropriate survey and registration process and undertaking the level of consultation required to gain agreement to a set of land use and transfer regulations is a timely and potentially costly task. Previous governments of Solomon Islands have acknowledged the need for such a process but have either accorded it a low priority or lacked the sufficient human and financial resources to pursue it.<sup>20</sup> As Crocombe notes, land registration and survey ‘is of no value (in fact it is counter-productive) unless the government has the financial and technical resources, and staff of the necessary integrity to maintain and enforce records of high integrity.’<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Duncan and Chand, *Arc of Instability*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Crocombe, *Security in Melanesia*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

Australian assistance in conducting this task would prove extremely beneficial. Australia is well placed to provide trained surveyors, land use experts and legal officers that could assist local professionals and government officials establish appropriate procedures and commence work on the ground. This contribution need not extend to all provinces in Solomon Islands or indeed all parts of Guadalcanal. Targeted activity in the north and east of the island, where the majority of tensions have arisen, would provide considerable stability.

### **Public sector reform**

Reform of the SIPF and the Public Service would also constitute an essential element in Australia's strategy to reduce ethnic tensions. Restoration of public confidence in the SIPF in particular will only be achieved if members involved in the coup of 2000 are punished and the organisation itself is seen to be impartial in upholding the law. To this end, officers thought to be involved in illegal activity during the conflict and those responsible for the forced removal of the country's elected government, should be investigated and where found guilty, removed from their positions. Recruits entering the force should be drawn from all nine provinces on a proportional basis and the current bias towards Malaitans brought to an end. Where appropriate, Australia should also provide training assistance and consider seconding a number of federal and state police officers to the SIPF to provide the basis around which a more professional force can form.

Similar measures should be taken in the Public Service. The over-representation of Malaitans in government employment needs to be addressed over time through more transparent recruitment and promotion mechanisms. This could be done within a broader strategy to reduce personnel numbers in the Public Service that is already considered to be top-heavy and a considerable drain on government finances. Once again, officers believed to have taken part in corrupt activities should be investigated and removed if found guilty. One way to achieve greater effectiveness and to restore public confidence in the Public Service's professionalism and impartiality is to ensure that some positions are held by qualified foreign officers from the region. Australia is well placed to assist in this regard and could make available for short and medium term attachment a number of highly qualified personnel.

## Justice and reconciliation

Countries seeking to recover from ethnic conflict rarely achieve lasting peace if violence and corruption are seen to go unpunished. The failure of governments to pursue the perpetrators of crime creates an environment in which the individual and collective wounds of victims fail to heal and grievances remain unaddressed. Solomon Islands faces many difficulties in this regard. Successive governments have granted amnesty to the perpetrators of ethnic violence, crime and corruption on no less than four occasions since the outbreak of hostilities in 1998, with the latest being granted by Prime Minister Kemakeza prior to the arrival of the Australian-led military and police mission.<sup>22</sup> This has led local commentators such as Roughan to lament that:

Here we are back tracking again, treating militants as our top priority rather than the nation's children. What are we saying to our kids? Aren't we teaching them: If crimes are really ugly, hurt thousands of innocents but are committed by many Solomon Islanders, then the state will find a way to give full pardon. God forbid that a militant should spend a single day in prison, face court action or compensate those who have lost greatly.<sup>23</sup>

These frustrations were also expressed in a petition to the Prime Minister from local and expatriate Solomon Islanders that called for the Australian-led force to be given the power to investigate and apprehend those believed responsible for crimes in recent years.<sup>24</sup>

Reluctance by the Kemakeza Government to pursue criminals is in part based on the belief that little is to be gained from pursuing what it calls 'old crimes.'<sup>25</sup> There are also fears that former militants will again take up arms if they feel threatened by the possibility of conviction and imprisonment. The granting of blanket amnesty, however, is seen by many Solomon Islanders as a move by the Kemakeza Government to avoid investigation of its own activities. Alfred Sasako, a member of the Solomon Islands parliament, has called for the Prime Minister to step aside while corruption allegations against him are investigated.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> C Skehan, 2003, 'Petitioners fear troops lack power' (*Petitioners fear troops lack power*), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/07/03/1057179095938.html> (Accessed 8 Jul 2003).

<sup>23</sup> J Roughan, 2003, 'Amnesty ... yet again!' (*Amnesty yet again*), *Dev-Zone.Org*, 30 June, <http://www.dev-zone.org/kcdocs/Roughan04071003.html> (Accessed 8 Jul 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Skehan, *Petitioners fear troops lack power*.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ABC Radio*, 2003, 'Calls for PM Kemakeza to be probed for corruption', Asia Pacific ABC Radio, <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac/programs/s931743.htm> (Accessed 2 Sep 2003).

If Australia is to achieve its goal of building lasting stability in Solomon Islands, it needs to place greater pressure on the Kemakeza Government to commence an active program of investigations into events since 1998 and to bring prosecutions against those suspected of having committed crimes. Indications to date, however, are that it is reluctant to pursue this approach, with Foreign Minister Downer suggesting that the intervention force would operate within ‘the constraints of the invitation we have received.’<sup>27</sup> Short of this commitment, Australia might nevertheless achieve progress in healing the wounds of victims by supporting local efforts to institute a Certificate of Amnesty program. According to Roughan, such an approach would draw on local customs and traditions associated with reconciliation and would require the perpetrators of crime to show appropriate contrition for their actions in a way acceptable to those they had wronged.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Solomon Islands remains at risk from the re-emergence of ethnic conflict at some stage in its medium to long-term future. Those underlying factors that proved most conducive to the outbreak of violence in 1998 remain largely unaddressed and likely to play a future role in the generation of ethnic division. In addition to these problems, the events of the last five years have provided many Solomon Islanders with new and more bitter animosities towards members of other ethnic groups. While these threats to the continuing stability of Solomon Islands may never be fully removed, there is much that Australia can do to assist its neighbour meet these challenges. Australian assistance in the implementation of constitutional reform, attempts to create more even economic development and the development of a strong national consciousness should provide Solomon Islands with a more viable future.

<sup>27</sup> Skehan, *Petitioners fear troops lack power.*

<sup>28</sup> Roughan, *Amnesty yet again.*

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The success of current Australian efforts to help restore enduring stability to Solomon Islands will depend on the implementation of strategies that address those factors that led to the outbreak of violence between the IFM and MEF. This monograph has sought to contribute to this process of program development by exploring the role of ethnicity in the social, economic and political life of Solomon Islands and examining claims that ethnic tensions were the cause of violent clashes between Guales and Malaitans. Based on a review of the causes of ethnic conflict elsewhere in the world and a detailed examination of events in Solomon Islands in 1998–2000, it has been demonstrated that ethnic tensions did play a central role in the outbreak of violence on Guadalcanal. Analysis has also revealed that Solomon Islands remains at risk from the re-emergence of ethnic conflict but that there is much that Australia can do to assist its South Pacific neighbour achieve enduring stability.

Colonial legacies and poor national leadership since independence created an environment in Solomon Islands that was conducive to the emergence of ethnic conflict in 1998. The underlying causes of the conflict consisted of a range of cultural, structural, political and economic factors. These included: a lack of national consciousness; problematic ethnic geography; contested constitutional arrangements; and uneven economic development and wealth distribution. Conflict itself was also sparked by proximate causes closely linked to ethnicity such as elite politics, emerging security dilemmas and external political factors.

Solomon Islands in 2003 possesses many of the characteristics that led to conflict in the late 1990s. The country continues to search for a shared national consciousness and a commitment by politicians to national issues over personal interests. Constitutional reform remains a goal of many Solomon Islanders and uneven economic development continues to be a divisive factor. Solomon Islands also struggles with new problems, with fresh and vivid memories of violence posing a particular danger to the on-going stability of the country.

These challenges to the continuing stability of Solomon Islands require significant attention. There is much, however that Australia can do to assist its neighbour to meet these problems. Australian assistance in the implementation of constitutional reform, the decentralisation of services and the creation of a stronger national consciousness should provide Solomon Islands with a more viable future.

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