

US-backed opposition in Solomon Islands opposes ties to Beijing

By Patrick O'Connor
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Backed by the US State Department, opposition politicians in the Solomon Islands are continuing their efforts to sabotage the government's diplomatic switch from Taiwan to Beijing in September last year.

The parliamentary opposition in the capital, Honiara, maintains that Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's recognition of China is illegitimate. A provincial administration in Malaita—one of nine country's provinces and the most populous—insists that it has the right to maintain its own relations with Taiwan, and refuses to recognise Beijing.

Malaita's separatist premier, Daniel Suidani, is currently suing the national government after authorities seized a shipment of medical equipment that was en route from Taiwan to Malaita on June 11. The supplies were promoted by the Malaitan provincial government as a contribution to the fight against coronavirus, and reportedly included thermal imaging cameras and medical masks.

After police seized the equipment, Attorney General John Muria Junior explained that the shipment represented an "act of defiance of a government decision" and a possible breach of the Sedition Act.

The police seizure came three days after Daniel Suidani issued a provocative statement praising Taiwan for sending an earlier shipment of food and medical aid. He repeatedly referred to coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus," echoing US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's efforts to scapegoat China for the pandemic. Suidani's statement was denounced by the Solomon Islands foreign minister, and by Chinese embassy officials in Honiara.

The provincial premier responded to the police seizure by promoting a social media campaign aimed at pressuring the government to release the supplies, with the hashtag #MalaitanLivesMatter. His government is

now pursuing a legal case in Honiara.

The latest conflict between the national government and Malaita's provincial administration follows months of tension over the China diplomatic switch.

In May, Suidani denounced two members of the national government from Malaita who visited the island alongside employees of the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. The team conducted a feasibility study on a new road project.

In response, Suidani declared: "We are strongly opposed to PRC [People's Republic of China] communist ideology and investment." Without citing any relevant laws, he claimed the authority to deny any Chinese national entry to Malaita and to block any economic activity involving Chinese corporations.

One national government member responded by threatening to suspend the Malaitan regional administration, using the state of emergency powers imposed in response to the coronavirus threat.

The government has not done so, though it retains sweeping powers under the state of emergency. The Solomon Islands remains one of the few countries in the world yet to register a coronavirus infection. A surge in cases in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, however, now threatens to spill over into adjacent Pacific states.

Widespread infection in Solomon Islands would quickly overwhelm the impoverished country's makeshift healthcare system. The situation is an indictment of Australian imperialism, which led an aggressive military-police intervention into the country in 2003, on a spurious "humanitarian" pretext. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) involved Australian expenditure of \$2.6 billion, of which almost nothing went to health and other basic needs of the population.

The World Health Organisation five years ago carried out a comprehensive review of the Solomon Islands' health system. It found that health centres and clinics in rural areas, where the majority of the population live, had an "urgent need for upgrade, repair or renovation; many facilities were operating without proper water and sanitation, electricity and basic medical equipment." The report added: "There are serious shortages of clinical equipment and medical supplies at most health facilities, with hospitals often relying on old and poorly maintained medical, diagnostic and surgical equipment."

In any country, a provincial administration attempting to maintain its own foreign relations in direct opposition to national government policy would be provocative and unlawful. The Malaitan administration's actions are especially reckless because they threaten to reignite the Solomon Islands' low-intensity civil war that took place between 1999 and 2003. This conflict, in which the separatist Malaita Eagle Force militia was a central participant, cost around 200 lives and forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes.

US imperialism is playing a crucial role in encouraging Suidani's provocations. Washington viewed with outrage the Solomon Islands' diplomatic switch to Beijing as it cuts across American efforts to isolate China. Determined to assert US dominance in Asia, the Trump administration is accelerating its war drive against Beijing.

Shortly before Sogavare officially announced the shift from Taiwan to China, a team of US state department and defence department officials made a secretive visit to Malaita and held behind closed doors discussions with Suidani. The Malaitan premier subsequently declared he would refuse to recognise the diplomatic switch, and launched a campaign against the Chinese government on an anti-communist, evangelical Christian basis.

In January, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the US and Australian governments were preparing a destabilisation campaign against the elected national government. That article highlighted the implications of Republican Senator Marco Rubio's threat, issued via Twitter, to crash the Solomon Islands' economy by "potentially ending financial assistance & restricting access to US dollars & banking."

Since this statement the coronavirus crisis hit the United States and the world, Washington has not moved to implement Rubio's threat. Nor has Suidani explained whether there has been an official response to his request late last year to the US and Australian governments to "be part of Malaita security."

US-backed provocations in Solomon Islands will likely be stepped up in the next period. Pompeo delivered a highly-provocative speech on July 23 that effectively declared "regime change" as the overarching goal of the US in China. Within the framework of this aggressive policy, State Department operatives no doubt regard the people of the Solomon Islands as inconsequential and expendable pawns in their "game."

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