

Australia Served US Interests as Anti-China Riots Gripped the Solomon Islands

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During the past week, Honiara, the capital of the South Pacific country of the Solomon Islands, has been rocked by thousands of people rioting. For days, crowds of protesters flocked to the National Assembly and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. They also failed to burn the Parliament building but succeeded in setting the Prime Minister’s residence on fire. Simultaneously, riots began to unfold in the capital and other cities as disgruntled people smashed grocery stores and houses in Honiara’s Chinatown in violence partially motivated by anti-China sentiment.

Sogavare appealed to neighbouring countries for help, with small teams of military personnel and police from Australia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji being immediately dispatched. The total number of peacekeepers is about 200 personnel. Although this may appear to be a small number, it is remembered that the Solomon Islands has a population of only about 690,000 people who are scattered across 300 inhabited islands.

During the riots, three people were killed and more than 100 were arrested. The country’s economy suffered a loss of \$227 million, a huge blow when considering their 2020 GDP was only \$1.5 billion.

Although the unrest in Honiara has subsided, in parliament, the opposition is preparing to vote against Sogavare’s leadership and force his resignation through no-confidence.

Sogavare’s decision two years ago to establish diplomatic ties with Beijing, and thus sever ties with Taipei, has been a focal point of criticism against his leadership. During the rioting, a delegation from the most populous island of Malaita arrived in Honiara, which is located on the island of Guadalcanal, and expressed displeasure with the diplomatic decision.

For a long time, there were problems between Malaita Island and the central government, particularly over issues in the mining and logging sectors as they have created problems for

local businesses. Malaita islanders felt that their interests were not fully accounted for by policymakers in Honiara. These issues also emerged more strongly in the context of the economic crisis that arose in the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The archipelago has been closed for nearly two years, meaning that foreign tourists and businesspeople do not visit, contributing to economic stagnation.

At the start of the riots, Sogavare blamed foreign interference over his government's decision to switch alliances from Taiwan to Beijing for the anti-government protests, arson and looting. However, it is difficult to believe that the mostly subsistence agricultural people of Malaita are so politically savvy that they would rather maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei instead of Beijing. This is especially the case when the whole world, with the exception of 14 small United Nation member states, all adhere to the "One China" principle and maintain diplomatic relations with Beijing and not Taipei.

It could be suggested that the political and economic elite of Malaita were coerced to protest against China. With this in mind, it is certainly possible that Australia, receiving instructions from Washington, is trying to weaken the Beijing-friendly government in Honiara to wane China's positions in the South Pacific Ocean. When considering anti-China alliances like QUAD (US, Australia, India and Japan) and AUKUS (US, Australia and the United Kingdom), the emergence of anti-China riots in Honiara is unsurprising, especially as these two Washington-led blocs were established for the sole purpose of opposing and challenging Beijing across the Indo-Pacific region.

As the Solomon Islands falls under Australia's so-called area of responsibility in Washington's world vision, Australian military personnel and police were the first to arrive to restore order. Despite Malaitan's leading the protest against the government and Beijing, Malaita's Premier, Daniel Suidani, accused the Australian government of "holding up a corrupt leadership" by sending in reinforcements to help the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force respond to the riots.

China has officially expressed concern about rioting in the Solomon Islands and reminded that the "One China" principle cannot be violated. However, the confrontation between the opposition and the Sogavare administration will continue. Although Australia is maintaining the status quo in the Solomon Islands, it has demonstrated how easily it can land troops in the country with impunity, a likely message towards Beijing. It is also likely that Australia, on orders from Washington, will use its resources to ensure that an anti-Beijing government returns to power. In this context, the internal political turmoil in the Solomon Islands will continue until at least 2023 when the next general election will be held.

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