

Mission Creep: Statebuilding from Honiara to Dili

Anna Powles

The violence on the streets of Dili since early May 2006 and the return of a multinational peacekeeping force has swiftly dispensed with the widely propagated belief that East Timor is the poster child of external statebuilding. A month earlier, riots in Honiara similarly cast a long-overdue critical eye on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and its failure to sufficiently gauge and respond to the socio-political climate of the very country they are rebuilding.

It is alarming, therefore, to hear Australian Justice Minister Chris Ellison's proposal that a RAMSI-type intervention should form the template for a future United Nations intervention in East Timor. The writing is not yet on the wall in the Solomons but of the myriad of lessons that can, and should, be extracted from the RAMSI experience, the most prescient and obvious message relates to the fallibility of external solutions for internal crises. External processes invariably lack or are unable to sustain local legitimacy and more often than not exclude the very populations they are supposedly assisting thus creating further divisions. This is, in real terms, the political economy of statebuilding 101. Hang on, wasn't that lesson already learnt in East Timor?

Back on the streets of Honiara, one might very well wonder. But in Canberra, Australia's very own *mission civilisatrice*, is heralded as the epitome of next-generation statebuilding. In this epoch of rebuilding states that are 'failing' or 'weak' and thus potentially pose a security threat beyond their crumbling and arbitrarily imposed colonial borders, Australia is apparently succeeding in the Solomon Islands where its fellow coalition partner is failing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development selected the RAMSI case study as part of the pilot study on principles for good international engagement in fragile states which at the very least acknowledges the fallibility and work-in-progress nature of such enterprises.

One cannot – and should not - diminish the many positives of RAMSI. A salient illustration of a fundamental difference RAMSI has made since its arrival in July 2003 was related a year later by a woman who stood up at the back of a conference room and told the mission's Honiara-based local and

expatriate critics that since RAMSI had arrived she could walk to the market to buy food for her children without the fear of being raped. RAMSI provided a circuit-breaker after five years of tensions and did so with remarkable success and ease. The problem is that the mission promised more and has not delivered.

It would, therefore, be irresponsible to dismiss the cautionary tale that this particular statebuilding exercise does offer in light of the fact that any future UN intervention in East Timor – or beyond - will draw heavily on Australian experience and expertise. The lessons are not insignificant because RAMSI is unique if only because the art of statebuilding is nothing less than exceptional even if the manner in which it is undertaken is anything but. It is indeed grand in scale and ambition but not, tragically, in the transfer of ideas into on-the-ground achievements. What lies at the core of this disjuncture between policy and practice and ideals and reality is the failure of RAMSI to engage with Solomon Islanders at both the capacity-building level within government and at the community level with both the conflict's victims and the participants. The future of the Solomons that RAMSI has engaged in the making must be as much about the every day lives of the country's citizens as it is about fiscal reform and machinery of government.

Herein lie four of the fundamental lessons of RAMSI for those contemplating the mission as a template for intervention in Timor Leste and its recipients.

Law and Order Does Not Equal Peace and Security

One of the greatest mistakes of the mission has been to assume that law and order equals peace and security. RAMSI's primary mandate was the restoration of civil order and to that effect, approximately 3,730 high-powered and other weapons and 306,851 rounds of ammunition were collected and approximately 4,182 militants and criminals arrested, including the two notorious militant leaders Harold Keke from the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal and Jimmy Rasta from North Malaita. The halcyon days of 2003 contributed to the mission's authority and RAMSI continued to ride the wave of legitimacy right through 2005. But the issues at the core of the conflict remain unaddressed and until they are, law and order serves to simply create a veneer of security. Moreover, RAMSI has sung a familiar tune from the outset – that its role is to create the 'space' for conflict reconciliation to take place – and harmonised on the difficulties of 'managing expectations.' In response to a recent Solomon Islands Government-sponsored report by the Review Taskforce (June 2006) headed by Reverend Philip Funifaka, which lays the blame for the failure of peace partially at the door of RAMSI (and the Australian High Commission), Special Coordinator James Batley stated that

RAMSI's position has always been that one of its key roles is to help create a stable environment in which Solomon Islanders themselves can take

forward the task of peace and reconciliation, at their own pace, on accordance with their own customs and traditions.¹

Batley is absolutely correct. But April demonstrated that the environment is not stable and the only way it will become so is if matters of peace and reconciliation addressed. The UNDP Report on 'Emerging Priorities in Preventing Future Violent Conflict' states that RAMSI recognizes that "order" is not the same as "peace" and that the absence of overt violence is not the same as the presence of active peace.² Yet the dichotomy remains. In the words of one Solomon Islander from the squatter settlements in the hills behind Honiara, "law and order is here but peace is not in our hearts."³ Yet peacebuilding has thus far been given cursory treatment by the mission and, remarkably, unlike its contemporaries, RAMSI does not have a peacebuilding unit nor has it conducted a review of its peace and security mandate. The salient lesson of the Honiara riots is that RAMSI, and particularly its law and order arm, the Participating Police Force with the Royal Solomon Islands Police, needs to be actively engaged at the community level not least for intelligence gathering purposes but also to better understand the complexities of post-conflict insecurity.

Capacity Building For Who Exactly?

The often-quoted phrase 'weitem olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem' ('wait for RAMSI to come and fix it') reveals both the culture of dependency that the mission has created and the attitude amongst certain Canberra bureaucrats and RAMSI personnel about the commitment and ability of Solomon Islanders. An equally common refrain amongst some Australian in-line personnel and advisors was that they often found it easier to do the job themselves thereby subverting the very people whose capacity is supposedly being built. The approach to capacity building through the transfer of skills also reinforces the notion that what is 'best practice' comes from outside (Australia) rather than acknowledging and incorporating aspects of Solomon Islands public service culture (and culture more broadly) which may be more appropriate in light of the context. Francis Fukuyama argues that

there is an inevitable contradiction between imposing 'best practice' outcomes and developing local capacity...If the state lacks popular legitimacy and the population are not engaged and actively supporting state capacity-building measures then there is only a limited amount that can be achieved by external technical advisors, regardless of their motivation or capability.⁴

¹ "Taskforce: Cause of Solomons Conflict Not Addressed," *Solomon Star*, 15 June 2006.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Emerging Priorities in Preventing Future Violent Conflict*, 2004, p.19.

³ Personal Communication, Honiara, November 2005.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and Order in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Profile Books, 2004, pp.120-123.

Which raises an additional concern often voiced on the streets of Honiara. As a consequence of the rapid deployment of RAMSI, Australian civilian personnel received little to no language and cultural training. Moreover, as the mission has sought to recruit greater numbers from the echelons of Canberra's bureaucracy, young and inexperienced civil servants lacking in the ability to successfully and sensitively mentor their Solomon Islands counterparts, often ignorant of local culture and devoid of the kind of long-term commitment that makes all the institutional and personal difference, began to arrive in droves. Moreover, two years on from deployment, RAMSI had not undertaken a review of its capacity-building policies and programs nor did it make any subsequent internal reviews public despite the political expedience of doing so in light of the Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons' Group 2005 report on the mission which recommended the formulation of a capacity building strategy and greater inclusion of Solomon Islanders.⁵ If there is one lesson that the United Nations Transitional Authority to East Timor laid bare it was the importance of constant monitoring and evaluation of capacity building policies within statebuilding missions. The failure to do so serves to further alienate the local population both from the mission and the government.

Engaging With Local Populations Is Vital

The burning of Chinatown and the rampaging through Honiara of clearly orchestrated groups caught RAMSI off guard and exposed the gulf that exists between the mission and the local population. The Participating Police Force (PPF) arm of RAMSI was ill-prepared to deal with the demonstrators lacking in prior basic intelligence which would have, at the very least, compensated for the lack of language skills on the day. The reaction to the riots, mired by confusion and over-reaction, revealed, as Australian journalist Mary-Louise O'Callaghan aptly put it, the vacuum that exists between RAMSI and the local population.⁶ The tide of legitimacy that lulled the mission into a false sense of security despite the December 2005 shooting of Australian Protective Services officer Adam Dunning ebbed well before. Dunning was killed at Borderlines - known informally on the local bus/taxi transport route as "RAMSI Stap/Stop" – and it is here in the hinterlands behind Honiara where the squatter settlements and communities of internally displaced persons, have sprung up that there exists a great deal of anti-RAMSI resentment. Whether it be due to a broader sense of marginalisation both politically and economically, or anger over culturally offensive behaviour and aggressive arrest tactics, or a sheer lack of presence in communities struggling within themselves over issues of *kwaso* drinking and related violence and desperate for support, the anti-RAMSI

⁵ Eminent Persons Group, *Mission Helpem Fren*, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva, May 2005.

⁶ Mary Louise O'Callaghan, *RAMSI: The Challenges Ahead*, paper presented at the workshop *Solomon Islands: Where to Now?* Australian National University, Canberra, 5 May 2006.

anger that surfaced in April had been festering for months. The targeting of local Chinese or *waku*, during the April riots demonstrates the dangers of alienation within communities and scapegoating. RAMSI is part of the community both at the macro and micro levels. Its legitimacy and authority are intrinsically and unavoidably based on its engagement with the local population. Current research on the best practices of conflict prevention emphasize the centrality of involving local participation or, at the very least, ensuring that international and national efforts recognized local needs and capacity and promoted ownership of the process of peacebuilding.⁷

Nation Building=Successful State Building (Reconciliation is the Key)

Ellison's recommendation of RAMSI as a template for a similar-type mission in Timor Leste reveals a great deal about the lack of understanding about the fundamental difference between state and nation building and the correlation with peace and security. Ellison suggests that

the RAMSI template, if you like, is a very important way to go in nation building, and it demonstrates, I think, a format which can work in nation building.⁸

But RAMSI is not engaged in nation building because if it were it would mean addressing the core issues at the root of the conflict and fostering the socio-cultural ties that are the requisite foundations or lifelines of a nation-state. This is something which it has steadfastly refused to do instead passing the buck (not unfairly) to a government that up until the change in leadership in April lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people - a point reinforced by the feeling amongst many Solomon Islanders that RAMSI was acting as a 'shadow government.' Rather RAMSI is engaged in the limited business of statebuilding which is primarily concerned with the strengthening of the state apparatus. In the words of one Solomon Islander, RAMSI is involved in "conflict-neutral state-building"⁹ yet the concepts of state and nation building are used interchangeably without any real sense of either the difference in application or implication. Moreover, creating the space for peace talks is sometimes simply not enough to foster the discussions that need to take place. The violence in East Timor this year demonstrates only too clearly that statebuilding will not be successful if reconciliation has not been part of the dual process of rebuilding the nation. The proposal contained in the Manasseh Sogavare Government's Grand Coalition for Change policy framework for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a process that RAMSI should engage with as a genuine member of the Solomon Islands community and for the benefit of capacity-

⁷ International Peace Academy, *Sharing Best Practices on Conflict Prevention: The UN, Regional and Sub-regional Organizations, National and Local Actors*, 2002.

⁸ *The World Today*, ABC, 2 June 2006.

⁹ Personal Communication, Honiara, September 2005.

building RAMSI as a statebuilding machine that acknowledges the centrality of peace, participation and reconciliation.

The notion of templates and the transference of statebuilding norms and practices from one post-conflict environment to the next fails to heed the fact that context is everything. The first rule of the OECD's Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States is to "take context as the starting point."¹⁰ The second rule that I would suggest is that history is everything (especially the second time around) and if the lessons of UNTAET were not heeded in the development and implementation of RAMSI those considering the Solomons mission as a template for East Timor should think carefully.

Anna Powles is a PhD researcher at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, the Australian National University. Her research examines the failure of peace missions in Bougainville, East Timor and the Solomon Islands to genuinely engage with local populations and the consequences for long term peace. anna.powles@anu.edu.au.

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States*, April 2005.