

Guns for the Palace Guard in Honiara: We Should Worry

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Introduction

Philip Alpers from Sydney University writes of the Solomon Islands that

"If ever there was a signal likely to invite suspicion of budding despotism, surely it's the leader of a penurious island nation racing to form a 'Close Personal Protection Unit' of armed guards for his own use."

"Bringing guns back to the Solomons," Alpers argues, "would reverse a life-saving regional trend begun in Bougainville, and seen most recently in East Timor, where the first Australian peacekeeping commander declared: 'We will be disarming everybody in Dili.'"

Moreover, writes Alpers,

"across 20 Pacific nations, and now in East Timor, the most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict were leaked from lawfully imported police, military and civilian holdings. It's this diversion of lethal weapons from licit to illicit use that is the concern of police and peacekeepers around the world."

Essay - Guns for the Palace Guard in Honiara: We Should Worry

If ever there was a signal likely to invite suspicion of budding despotism, surely it's the leader of a penurious island nation racing to form a 'Close Personal Protection Unit' of armed guards for his own use. Although Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare may yet provide evidence of a convincing need, his attempt to fly a hand-picked team of 50 for weapon training in Taiwan was seen in Honiara and elsewhere as the sign of a slippery slope.

It was only in 2003 that Solomon Islands parliamentarians unanimously passed legislation soliciting the invasion of their own country. RAMSI's first order of business would be to collect and destroy all guns. Because the great majority of high-powered weapons misused in the Solomons had been leaked from police armouries, even the Royal Solomon Islands Police were disarmed. For the past 3½ years, the nation has been recovering under the eye of a multinational Police Protection Force.

Granted, John Howard is protected 24/7 by his own ethnically similar armed guards. But we have yet to hear suggestions that they committed gun crimes, moonlighted as persecutors of an ethnic minority, or overthrew an elected government.

Bringing guns back to the Solomons would reverse a life-saving regional trend begun in Bougainville, and seen most recently in East Timor, where the first Australian peacekeeping commander declared: 'We will be disarming everybody in Dili.' Even on tiny Pitcairn Island, police preparing for a 2004 sexual abuse trial impounded the rifles used by islanders to shoot breadfruit out of trees. In our region, an unarmed society is a polite society.

And it's not just the peacekeepers who feel this way. Due to conspicuous local support, disarmament in the Solomons was almost easy. More than 1,000 communities had already joined the Weapons Free Villages campaign, and "No Guns" signs were ubiquitous. Last week this energy was re-ignited, with the National Council of Women and the National Peace Council leading the charge to deplore Mr Sogavare's surprise move. To date, the prime minister seems unsupported by any body of citizens.

Of course Manasseh Sogavare's flak was mainly aimed at Canberra. By far the largest spender in the effort to assist the Solomons, and a victim of its own heavy-footed imprint on the Pacific of late, Australia provides a broad target for complaints of paternalism and colonialism. In less extreme circumstances, Mr Sogavare might have played this fiddle to a sympathetic audience. But not last week. Canberra's success in "persuading" Taiwan to remove weapons from its police training curriculum, and Taipei's swift promise not to provide guns to the Solomons, was greeted with protest only by Mr Sogavare and his close faithful. In Honiara, there is even some talk that this overstep might prove to be the PM's undoing.

Solomon Islanders are often said to share a widespread distaste for guns. Largely predisposed to a peaceful existence, many see the macho appeal of firearms as something foreign. Yet on Wednesday, Police Minister Isaac Inoke announced his intention to re-form and re-arm not only the Protection and Guarding Unit, but also the Rapid Response and Police Field Force units. The new paramilitary Police Field Force sounded just like the old version, whose members were involved in ethnic violence and a government coup.

These announcements had Solomon Islanders swapping the names of former militants supposedly invited to join the training for Mr Sogavare's personal guard, memories of entire villages terrorised with just one or two weapons, and renewed security concerns for any new guns which might arrive. In 2000, ethnic gangs and sympathetic police simply raided government armouries for assault weapons. It seems unlikely that Mr Sogavare would entrust the security of his guard's guns to

Australian-controlled peacekeepers. So as one Honiara resident asked: "What are these guys going to do - put them under their beds?"

Just a few days later came the arrest in Honiara of a 62 year-old Australian war veteran, charged with plotting to assassinate Mr Sogavare, allegedly under orders from Australia's PM, John Howard. Renowned for loose talk over a beer, the old digger seemed to lack any means of committing such an act, and his jailing seemed more convenient than credible.

Of course it's not the guns which cause the problem. Many of the peacekeepers carry weapons, and there seems to be tacit acceptance that one day, some Royal Solomon Islands Police officers will likely do the same. But as each country with experience of gun violence can testify, every factory-made illegal firearm began as a legal gun, in the hands of a lawfully entitled owner. Across 20 Pacific nations, and now in East Timor, the most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict were leaked from lawfully imported police, military and civilian holdings. It's this diversion of lethal weapons from licit to illicit use, and its consequences for violence prevention and crime control, that is the concern of police and peacekeepers around the world.

To lessen the risk of people being shot, it seems a good start to remove guns. Particularly in the absence of any credible threat, Manasseh Sogavare has yet to convince his country and ours that arming a perfunctorily trained palace guard and police strike squads with military-style weapons is likely to lower the risk of gun violence.

Information about the author

Philip Alpers, adjunct associate professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney, studies the public health effects of gun violence and the proliferation of firearms, particularly in the Pacific. He is the editor of [Gun Policy News](#), and contributed this essay from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

His previous APSNet policy forums are:

- [Guns and the Pacific - A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations](#): 19 October 2006
- [Australian government assault rifle now a common crime gun in Papua New Guinea](#): 7 August 2006

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http://www.health.usyd.edu.au/about/view_person.php?uid=palpers

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