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Peacemakers in Honiara: solution becomes part of the problem

Australian officials may unwittingly perpetuate resentment in the Solomons, writes **Michael Morgan**.

TO UNDERSTAND why a boisterous crowd that had assembled to witness the parliamentary election of the Solomon Islands Prime Minister turned violent and went on a looting rampage this week, it pays to appreciate the nature of the local politicking.

Politics in Solomon Islands is notoriously difficult to fathom, more so for the absence of broad-based political parties differentiated by ideology.

A superficial but useful framework is to understand Tuesday's election as a contest between the new guard, who support political reform, and the old guard, characterised by money politics.

The victorious candidate, Snyder Rini, was heir apparent to Sir Allan Kemakeza, the outgoing prime minister.

Job Dudley Tausinga, the unsuccessful candidate, leads a group of MPs who seek to develop more effective and responsible national governance. Public support for

Tausinga can be read as a message to MPs involved in money politics that a constituency for change is forming.

But this is only part of the story. There is a long way to go before Solomons politics will be defined solely by policies and issues. Factors including regionalism, personal rivalries and Chinese business links come into play.

What remains unanswered is why the supporters of reformist MPs turned to violence. Plausibly, the trigger was provided by Australian-led officials dispatched to the Solomon Islands under the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

After the election, the disappointed Opposition members led by Tausinga left Parliament House through the crowd.

Rini and his supporters were left barricaded inside. The crowd turned ugly when mission officers attempted to escort the Prime Minister from the building. Demonstrators hurled rocks at the vehicle in which

Rini was travelling and the group was forced to beat a hasty retreat, with some RAMSI officers suffering injuries.

While the crowd that massed at Parliament supported Tausinga, their response was driven by deep-seated grievances about political decision-making in Solomon Islands, done all too often behind closed doors, involving large amounts of money changing hands and which has resulted in governments being based not on policy

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coherence but the ability to mobilise cash quickly to shore up alliances.

This is where the perception of political interference comes into play.

There is a perception that Tommy Chan, a wealthy long-term resident Chinese, or "waku" businessman, secured support for Rini, the new Prime Minister. Tausinga and his allies simply could not match the offers made by this powerful clique.

The targets of the looting that followed the fracas at Parliament were waku-owned. New Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants were also targeted.

Waku storekeepers present a conspicuous target to disgruntled Solomon Islanders, not least for their wealth but also the perception that they grow rich on the proceeds of their businesses without contributing back to Solomon Islands society.

There is a presumption among Solomon

Islanders that sweet deals are struck between waku businessmen and senior politicians for mutual benefit, while grassroots Solomon Islanders are left to subsist on their gardens for food and whatever other meagre resources they can find.

The Chinatown looting reportedly resulted in the redistribution of these goods to regional areas. These events have the potential to affect the operation of RAMSI, which

has been functioning since 2003, helping to restore order and law and, more recently, focusing on improving governance.

Now, while RAMSI sets about re-establishing order, its long-term planners need to pay close attention to the workings of the country's political machine.

There has been great support for RAMSI's role in restoring order. The danger is that in encouraging political stability and protecting the status of the office of the Prime Minister – part of RAMSI's remit – officers will become implicated in the public eye in the common perception of shady dealings of some senior politicians.

Despite their distaste at RAMSI's presence, many MPs compromised by shady deals benefit from RAMSI's influence.

On the streets of Honiara, there is bound to be resentment about this de facto state of affairs.

Michael Morgan is the deputy director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions at the Australian National University. He is due to take part in induction training for Solomon Islands MPs in the coming weeks.