

Unit 43: The 'New Bigman System' In the Solomon Islands

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Figure 43.1. Map of Solomon Islands

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Know how modern Western government found its way to the the Solomon Islands
- Define 'island consciousness' and understand how it shaped events in the Solomon islands
- Describe the functions of the legislative council
- Identify important dates in the path to independence in the Solomon Islands

This unit on “My nation: my government” looks at the arrival of western government, and the path to independence in the Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands are situated in the south west Pacific, stretching in a double chain of islands some 1,400 kms from south-east of Papua New Guinea nearly down to Vanuatu. There are six main islands, Choiseul, Guadalcanal, Malaita, New Georgia and Santa Isabel. The main islands are mostly mountainous, steep and covered with tropical rainforest. They tend to be of volcanic origin with active volcanoes, hot springs and thermal areas. There are some areas of alluvial plains, particularly along the north-eastern side of Guadalcanal. This extensive stretch of plain is unique in the Pacific. The Solomon Islands fall within the humid tropics and are surrounded by expansive, picturesque coral reefs and lagoons.

Background

Across the archipelago there were scattered island communities with diverse customs, languages and traditions, and each small community had its own strong leaders known as Big Men. This fragmentation resulted in clusters of small communities emerging in their own localities with their own political systems and governance. This has always made it difficult to establish a single, central government.

The Solomon Islands had been inhabited for several thousand years when the expedition of Alvaro de Mendana de Neira arrived from the Spanish colony of Peru in 1568. He wished to return to the Solomons but it was more than 20 years before he could raise another expedition. He landed again on Santa Cruz in 1595. The little colony was a failure and the Spanish survivors departed.

Two centuries later, European traders and missionaries began to arrive. From 1877 until 1893 the Solomon Islands were within the jurisdiction of the British High Commissioner in Fiji. Charles Morris Woodford was appointed to become the Acting Residential High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands. With only eight Fijian Policemen and a total grant of \$3500, the newly appointed High Commissioner began to work on the establishment of a new colonial government and its policies.

In line with the British Policy, the new colonial administration immediately set about encouraging foreign investments. C.M. Woodford began making land available on long leased by declaring open some seemingly unoccupied land in the western Solomons. He also permitted freehold sales. In 1912, the colonial government became the sole buyer and leaser of land. By this time the colonial administration claimed to be “pacifying” the warlike tribes in order to attract more investment by traders, planters, missionaries, and foreign companies.

The archipelago almost became German, as did neighbouring New Guinea, and international rivalry forced the British to establish a Protectorate in 1893. Britain set up their High Commissioner's residence in Tulagi. The British Solomon Islands Protectorate, known by its acronym BSIP, remained a quiet backwater with little European development.

Japan invaded in World War II in 1942. After the war in 1946, some Solomon Islanders on Malaita formed the *Ma'asina Ruru* movement. Their idea was to rule themselves through their own traditional chiefs. However, the movement was quickly suppressed by the British colonial administrators as they viewed it a hindrance in the administration of the protectorate. (See UNIT 29 and 34 for topics on the Ma'asina Ruru movement)

Despite its short life, the movement had established an 'island consciousness' in the mind of some Solomon Islanders and the need to be politically free and unite not only with their 'wantoks' but also with other Solomon Islanders in order to establish a government of their own. In the 1960s, the British finally increased the appointment of local Solomon Islanders to the colonial government and later introduced the idea of elections.

Questions and Activities

1. In what year was the Solomon Islands declared a British Protectorate?
2. Why did the British declare the Solomon Islands a Protectorate?
3. Who ruled the Solomons before the British came?
4. Why did Malaitans want their own government?

The Protectorate and the Advisory Council

For much of the early colonial period, the administration of the BSIP was jointly in the hands of the British Western Pacific High Commissioner in Fiji and the Residential High Commissioner in Tulagi. Solomon Islanders were unaware of, or had no say in the new, centralised colonial administration of the protectorate. Most Islanders continued to govern themselves according to the norms and traditions of their own rural communities.

In 1912, an Advisory Council of four appointed expatriates was established and advised the Residential High Commissioner on issues affecting aspects of rule in the protectorate. These members could not make laws. In 1950, four Solomon Islanders were appointed to the Advisory Council.

In 1953, the Residential High Commissioner's headquarters was moved from the isolated small island of Tulagi to Honiara on Guadalcanal. This exerted political influence on a larger local populace.

Britain's Attitude:

"Set up by Britain reluctant to spend money on its remote possessions yet duty-bound to oversee the relationship between its subjects and the islanders, the Solomon's administration was mainly concerned with discouraging and punishing breaches of peace. So it remained until the 1950s. Nevertheless while possessing a narrow view of their responsibilities the colonial authorities did provide Solomon Islanders some measure of protection both from their fellows and – more importantly from European planters and traders. Thus, although a good deal of coastal land was sold for plantations the government ensured that land alienation did not get out of hand. Another form of protection by not further complicating the social structure of the Solomons, was the government's refusal to allow planters to import Asian labourers for work on plantation."

Figure 43.2. An extract from 'Ma'asina Rule' by Hugh Laracy, p. 3.

In 1958, the Advisory Council increased its membership to fourteen as the colonial administration's responsibilities expanded. The Council now had five Solomon Islanders, four expatriate government officers and five other Europeans appointed from businessmen, missionaries, traders and teachers.

Questions and Activities

5. Why were only expatriates appointed to the new Advisory Council?
6. Why were four Solomon Islanders appointed to the Advisory Council in 1950 and five more in 1958?
7. Read *Figure 43.1*. Describe in your own words the general policy of the British in the BSIP.

The legislative Council 1960-1974

In 1960 a significant change occurred. The Advisory Council was transformed into a Legislative Council with the responsibility to formulate laws and to administer the protectorate. By now there were twenty-one members in the Legislative Council and it was dominated by Solomon Islanders. They were still only appointed by the High Commissioner at his discretion.

Aware of the aims and activities of the Ma'asina Ruru Movement, and following United Nation's criticism of colonies around the world, in 1962, the Colonial administration gradually introduced elected councils based on district boundaries. As a result, Solomon islanders were given the mandate to elect their own local councillors.

These local councils were responsible for the management of individual islands until 1964. They were allowed to handle all local administrative matters. As well, elected members had been introduced into the Legislative Council. By 1966, the appointed members of the Legislative Council were reduced to fifteen, while elected members increased to fourteen.

But in 1967 the entire protectorate was divided into electorates or constituencies. Every person over 21 years of age was given the right to vote for a representative for their constituency in the Legislative Council. For nearly all Solomon islanders this was a new democratic political concept.

During that time, twelve of the fourteen members elected were Solomon Islanders, including Lily Ogatina the first women politician in Solomon Island's political history. In the eastern outer islands (now Temotu Province) representatives were not elected but were represented by their local councillors.

After each election, the High Commissioner chose eight members of the legislative council and appointed them to form the Executive Council. This took charge of each department within the colonial government. This was the first step towards the present system of cabinet and ministers in the modern government system in Solomon Islands. The Executive Council administered five governmental departments - education, finance, public health, works and agriculture.

The Internal Self Government and Independence

At the end of 1974, a new constitution was adopted allowing the Legislative Assembly to expand to 38 elected members. An Attorney General was appointed under this new constitution to provide legal advice to the government.

The most significant change within the Legislative Assembly was the election of a Chief Minister from among its members. The British High Commissioner became the Governor who no longer sat in the assembly. The Chief Minister became the head of government. He appointed ministers to form a council of ministers, known as the Cabinet. The first Chief Minister was Solomon Mamaloni. Other ministers were David Kausimae, Willie Betu, Gideon Zolovewke, Peter Thomson and Stephen Cheka.

Further changes in 1976, gave the Chief Minister and Cabinet power to control all aspects of the government except the public service, police, and foreign affairs. These powers were retained by the British but the Governor could now only make decisions and perform political duties on the advice of the Cabinet. By now, the government system had the characteristics of the Westminster model. This became the basis for the Solomon Islands government after independence.

In 1975 a committee was established in order to work on a constitution so the protectorate could become a sovereign state. The committee toured the archipelago, consulting with people on their views about the constitution. During this time, there was a general election and Peter Kenilorea was elected Chief Minister. He became the first Prime Minister under this new constitution. At this point, British gave up its rule and the protectorate became an independent state in 1978.

Questions and Activities

Copy the following table into your work book. Complete the table with data from what you have just read..

Year	Name of Governing Body	Title of Person in charge of Government	Number of members			
			Appointed		Elected	
			Expatriates	Solomon Islanders	Expatriates	Solomon Islanders
1962-67						
1974-76						
1978						

The New political Framework

Today the Solomon Islands is a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral legislature. The British Monarch is the Head of State, represented locally by a Governor-General. The National Parliament consists of 50 members including the Prime Minister and his Cabinet ministers. The Prime Minister is elected by Members of Parliament. Other Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister, from Members of Parliament.

General elections are usually held every four years, with all citizens over the age of 18 entitled to vote. The main political parties are the *United Party, the People’s Alliance Party, Labour Party* and

National Reconciliations for Unity. There are always Independents. New political parties are always being formed, and then collapse or merge with other Parties.

The second level or tier of government is responsible for the Provinces and local areas. The Provincial Governments and Area Councils across the archipelago have designated powers provided by the constitution. At present nine Provincial Assemblies and the Honiara Town Council are responsible for provincial administration, agriculture extension, health and medical services, education, public works, culture and sports.

Questions and Activities

9. Write a paragraph (of 100 words) under these headings by expanding on the words and phrases given.

- a) Stage 1 – 1889 to 1896 – the beginning of a protectorate
The British Government declared a 'Protectorate' over Solomon Islands and appointed C.M. Woodford as.....
- b) Stage 2 – Advisory Council
An advisory council of four expatriates was set.....
- c) Stage 3 – appointed Legislative Council
In 1960 the council was changed to a legislative council.....
- d) Stage 4 – elected Legislative Council
In 1964 the British introduced
- e) Stage 5 – Governing Council 1870-1874
The Governing Council was
- f) Stage 6 – 1974 Legislative Assembly and Self Government
In 1974, Self Government meant that
- g) Independence 1978

The form of government in 1978 was