

Opinion **Global Insight**

## Economic woes, not China, are at the heart of Solomon Islands riots

Diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China is not the main reason behind the recent social unrest

**KATHRIN HILLE**



Burnt-out buildings in Honiara: many of the ransacked properties were owned by ethnic Chinese © REUTERS

**Kathrin Hille** 10 HOURS AGO

After a mob burnt down buildings and pillaged shops in Honiara last week, the smoke over the capital of the Solomon Islands was [interpreted](#) as another iteration of the geopolitical battle between China and the US.

Many of the ransacked properties were owned by ethnic Chinese and some [reports](#) cast the unrest as “rioting over China”. Daniel Suidani, premier of Malaita, the home province of most of the protesters, has been campaigning against prime minister Manasseh Sogavare for his move to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China two years ago. Sogavare himself has claimed that the unrest was “influenced and encouraged by other powers”, a thinly veiled reference to aid Malaita has received from Taiwan and the US since the central government’s shift towards China.

The Solomon Islands, once a key battlefield between the US and Japan in the second world war, have again become a [frontline](#) in great power rivalry. But the latest Honiara riots also reflect a failure to address poverty and inequality and to provide its people with economic prospects.

“Geopolitical manoeuvring was a trigger but it isn’t the whole picture,” says Anna Powles, a senior lecturer at Massey University in New Zealand. “The dynamics underpinning the riots are a complex web of longstanding local grievances over the lack of economic development, corruption and the capturing of elites. These dynamics have intersected over the past three years with geopolitical competition ”

led by Australia managed to end the conflict known as “the tensions”, peace is fragile. Honiara saw violent protests after general elections in 2006 and in 2019.

The root cause is the lack of economic opportunity for young people displaced from poorer provinces and living on the outskirts of the capital, often without electricity or running water.

“You have a lot of unemployed young men living in predominantly Malaitan settlements there. They haven’t seen their lives improve in recent decades,” says Terence Wood, a research fellow at the Development Policy Institute of Australian National University. “Services, infrastructure and employment opportunities — in other words development — needs to come to the Solomon Islands.”

But that is unlikely to happen in a political system based on clientelism. “Australia gave a lot of aid in the wake of ‘the tensions’. But they couldn’t change the country’s underlying political economy,” adds Wood.

That is where China comes in. Businesses owned by ethnic Chinese have been targets in each round of rioting, partly because disenfranchised locals see them as a main source of corruption and economic inequality.

“There was some feeling against the Chinese businesses that are involved in the financing of domestic politics, but this is not new,” says Leliana Firisua, a Honiara resident influential in the Malaitan community. “This resentment will continue if they do not stop doing it.”

Ethnic Chinese have been dominating the retail sector for decades, but now Chinese companies are expanding into sectors where they had not previously competed with locals and other foreign investors, such as agriculture and resources. Moreover, observers of Solomon politics say the diplomatic switch to China has fuelled the cultivating of local politicians with money — long practised by Taiwan and also by foreign investors in the logging and mining industries.

“There have been rumours of an increasingly brazen personal inducement approach,” says Mihai Sora, a former Australian diplomat in the Solomon Islands and now research fellow at the Lowy Institute. “The mechanics are the same as those Taiwan used, but with more money.”

“Suidani has been quite effective in demagoguing that sentiment,” says Wood. He adds that without the charismatic local politician, the Taiwan-China topic might not have become such a huge issue.

But he demonstrated the explosive potential of the Solomons’ governance and development problems. Says Firisua: “This unrest will not stop unless what the people are demanding is achieved. And that is change.”

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