

# U4 Expert Answer



## Solomon Islands: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption

### Query

**Please provide an overview of corruption and anti-corruption in the Solomon Islands, including its drivers and legal and institutional framework against corruption.**

### Purpose

We are preparing an up-coming in-country anti-corruption workshop in the Solomon Islands.

### Content

1. Overview of corruption in the Solomon Islands
2. Corruption in natural resource management
3. Governance structures and anti-corruption efforts in the Solomon Islands
4. References

### Caveat

There are very few publicly available sources of information on corruption in the Solomon Islands, and almost no recent datasets and information about the state of corruption and anti-corruption in the country. More resources would need to be allocated to compile a comprehensive corruption profile for the country. This answer draws on a previous Helpdesk answer on [corruption challenges in small island developing states](#) in the Pacific region.

### Summary

As a developing small island state recovering from a period of political instability and civil unrest, the Solomon Islands face a number of corruption challenges fuelled by the size of the country and its geographic features, low state penetration, weak central institutions, of the region and specific governance challenges associated with the management of natural resources. Corruption manifest itself in a variety of forms, ranging from petty corruption, embezzlement, grand and political corruption and various forms of nepotism and patronage networks. Corrupt practices in the management of natural resources are specific areas of concerns given the current prospects of transitioning from a logging to a minerals-based economy in the coming years, with the country insufficiently prepared for this transition. The government has recognised the corruption challenges facing the country and the management of national resources, and is committed to address it with the development of an anti-corruption strategy, a freedom of information policy, the enactment of an anti-corruption bill and a whistleblower protection bill as a precursor to a right to information bill, as well as reform to strengthen existing anti-corruption legislation and institutions.

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## 1. Overview of corruption in the Solomon Islands

### Background

The Solomon Islands is an archipelagic state situated in the Pacific Ocean, consisting of six major islands and over 900 smaller islands. Like other Pacific island countries, the Solomon Islands face specific development challenges associated with their limited geographic size, small population, dependence on a narrow resource base, remoteness from large markets, limited international trade opportunities and vulnerability to natural disasters (Barcham 2007).

Governance of the country is hampered by its geographical features that create access challenges and a low degree of state penetration. In addition, poor governance has been exacerbated by the combined effect of civil conflicts and political instability, which are fuelled by the many conflicting interests of many heterogeneous tribal clans or groups that co-exist in the country, each with their own interests (Wilikilagi 2009). Other challenges, including over-centralisation of decision making in Honiara, the capital city, and uneven access to services and economic opportunities.

Conflicts over land tenure in the context of inter-island migration, which escalated into the 1998-2003 period of political instability and civil unrest, have also presented major challenges. In late 1998, fighting broke out between the Isatabus on Guadalcanal, the largest island, and migrant Malaitans from the neighbouring island, following a campaign of intimidation and violence towards Malaitan settlers, accused of taking land and jobs. Civil unrest mainly involved fighting between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force. As the security situation worsened, public administration deteriorated, leading to a state of near collapse by mid-2003, with intimidation and extortion of public servants and the public by self-styled "constables". This, along with rampant corruption, led to near fiscal ruin (World Bank no date).

The Malaitan Eagle Force staged a coup in June 2000, forcing the prime minister to resign. While an Australian-brokered peace deal was signed in October 2000, lawlessness continued until an Australian-led peacekeeping force arrived in July 2003, triggering a slow return to order. The Australian intervention also provided for the appointment of foreign nationals to government posts and included financial assistance with the aim of eventually making the country self-

sustaining. The military contingent withdrew in 2013 (BBC 2016).

The Solomon Islands is a constitutional multi-party parliamentary democracy. While the islands achieved independence within the British Commonwealth in 1976, Queen Elizabeth II remains the head of state, represented by a governor-general who acts on the advice of the prime minister and the cabinet. The governor-general is elected by parliament. The prime minister is also elected by a simple majority of members of parliament. The current prime minister, Manasseh Damukana Sogavare, was elected in December 2014 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [website](#)). Party structures in the Solomon Islands are fluid, with extensive coalition building usually required to form government. Weak political parties and unstable parliamentary coalitions lead to frequent government and cabinet changes (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [website](#)).

The economy is characterised by a dependence on aid and natural resource extraction and is heavily exposed to external shocks. Since the end of the tensions in 2003, aid flows have averaged around 30% of GDP (World Bank 2014). The Solomon Islands' economy is based on primary commodities with few opportunities to generate an alternative income. Economic growth prospects rest on the private sector and on developments in mining, agriculture and fishing, with some potential for tourism (ADB 2016). The Solomon Islands is one of the poorest countries in the region, with a per capita GNI of US\$1,610 and has been hit in recent years by successive global food, fuel and financial crises (World Bank 2014; BBC 2016). The majority of its labour force is engaged in subsistence farming and fishing. The economy of the Solomon Islands is heavily dependent on forestry, with timber the main export product. The country's growth prospects were severely affected in recent years by a fall in log exports and a major drop in international commodity prices. Palm oil production and gold mining are other sectors providing alternative sources of revenues (BBC 2016).

## Drivers of corruption

There are a number of factors that create fertile ground for corruption in Pacific island states (PIS), including the Solomon Islands.

The size of the country and the geographic features of the region create specific governance challenges. A geography of scattered islands, makes the supervision of local and provincial government particularly costly and challenging (Larmour 2005). This is especially true for the Solomon Islands which is characterised by weak central institutions and a low degree of state penetration, making the state unable to exercise effective control over the whole country (Barcham 2007). In practice, this translates into weak or non-existent public service provision, poor quality of regulatory/compliance functions (such as those in the fisheries and forestry sectors) and weak central oversight functions (parliaments, ombudsmen and audit institutions).

In addition, the concept of a centralised bureaucratic state, with values of impartiality, impersonality and equal treatment, has been introduced relatively recently in the region, and political institutions have not yet been fully integrated with their strong cultural and tribal traditions (Larmour 2005). Official duties may contradict traditional commitments to family and kin, and there are poor links between indigenous and “imported” political systems (World Bank 2014). As a result, there is a predisposition in the region to favour kin or people from the same tribal or language group in awarding contracts, appointments and scholarships. These tribal solidarities are deeply rooted in local groups who have lived for a long time in isolated communities (Larmour 2005).

Similarly, the small size of the country leads to a low electoral ratio of parliamentarians to citizens, making it more likely for politicians to know their constituents and facilitate the development of corrupt networks. The small size is also likely to fuel the personalisation of decision making and various forms of nepotism, cronyism and clientelism (Larmour 2005).

Aid dependency and low absorption capacity can create specific corruption challenges in the region. As already mentioned, the Solomon Islands is heavily reliant on foreign aid, which can have a destabilising impact on regular domestic accountability structures when aid is disbursed outside country systems. While there has been limited research on the scope and scale of aid

related forms of corruption in the Solomon Islands and on the country’s absorption capacity, some concerns have been raised in the past on aid resources being used to support patronage networks and being disproportionately channelled to politicians’ constituencies (Larmour 2005).

Melanesian resource rich countries, such as the Solomon Islands, can also face specific governance challenges associated with the management of natural resources. The timber industry has been reported to be a particular source of corruption in the Solomon Islands, for example, and mining is also expected to face similar governance challenges (see below) (Messick 2016). Some also argue that large-scale corruption in the Pacific Islands is perpetrated by outside interests. For example, the influence of international logging and mining companies in the Solomon Islands is well documented (Corbett 2013), as is the political power that foreign companies operating outside the bound of states and societal rules can exert on small countries like the Solomon Islands (Baines 2015).

## Extent of corruption

As a result, corruption is a significant challenge in many Pacific island countries, including the Solomon Islands.

Major indicators rate the Solomon Islands as very corrupt and having weak accountability and integrity institutions, pointing to systemic levels of corruption, as reflected in [2015 World Bank worldwide governance indicators](#). Although, in recent years, the country has improved its scores in terms of political stability (from 46.38 in 2005 to 70.95 in 2015 on a 0 to 100 scale), rule of law (from 18.66 in 2005 to 33.17 in 2015) and voice and accountability (from 50.96 in 2005 to 58.62 in 2015), it performs below average in terms of control of corruption – and the situation seems to be deteriorating (from 57.56 in 2005 to 46.15 in 2015) – and poorly in terms of regulatory quality (16.35 in 2015) and government effectiveness (14.42 in 2015).

Similarly, the Solomon Islands performs well below the regional and global average in the [2016 Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom](#), especially in terms of freedom from corruption (25 out of 100), and is ranked 161 out of the 166 countries assessed. In 2011, the Solomon Islands scored 2.7 on a 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean) scale and was ranked 120 of the 183

countries assessed by [Transparency International's 2011 Corruption perceptions Index](#). (The country has not been ranked since).

The rule of law is not effectively enforced across the country and systemic corruption increases the cost of business and deters much-needed long-term investment (Heritage Foundation 2016). Corruption is identified as one of the most problematic factors for doing business in the country in the [2015 World Bank enterprise survey](#). More than 65% of the firms surveyed identified corruption as a major constraint, while 43% of the firms experienced at least one bribe payment request (compared to a 30% regional average). A gift or an informal payment was requested in 27% of public transactions.

Citizens also experience corruption in their daily lives, with 34% of the respondents to Transparency International's [2013 Global Corruption Barometer](#) (GCB) reporting having paid a bribe to at least one of eight services listed in the survey in the preceding 12 months, while 65% of the respondents think that corruption has increased/increased a lot in the past two years.

## Forms of corruption

Corruption takes a variety of forms in the Solomon Islands, from petty and bureaucratic corruption to grand forms of corruption involving high-level officials.

### Petty and bureaucratic corruption

Considered as a fragile, post-conflict small island state, public institutions are still weak and in need of strengthening. Budget processes and financial management remain weak, unaccountable and poorly linked to service delivery requirements. There is a general lack of institutional capacity with insufficient human resource capacity and skills shortages. Policies and procedures are not implemented or enforced and need updating. Public administration processes are very centralised, but central agencies are very weak with limited connection between budgets, programmes, operational plans and resources (AusAid 2013).

Against this background, corruption and abuse of office are serious problems across public institutions. An auditor general's report found that at least US\$8.6 million in government funds from fiscal years 2012 and 2013 were unaccounted for (Freedom House 2016). Bribery at the point of service delivery is widespread. According to

Transparency International's [2013 Global Corruption report](#), 56% of the respondents who came in contact with the police reported paying a bribe, 49% to the land services 42% to get a permit or a licence, and 36% to access judiciary services.

Firms surveyed within the framework of the [2015 World Bank enterprise survey](#) report similar corruption challenges. 81.9% of the firms surveyed report being expected to make an informal payment or give a gift "to get things done". More specifically, 45.4% of the firms report being expected to give a gift to secure government contracts; 40.6% to get a construction permit, 39% to get an import licence, 30.9% in meetings with tax officials.

### Grand corruption and misuse of state resources

Public service and aid programmes are widely seen as opportunities for rent-seeking and personal enrichment (Freedom House 2016; AusAid 2013). Many public officials have faced charges of official abuse and corruption, including prosecutors, judges and even former ministers (including prime ministers) (Heritage foundation 2016). In March and April 2015, for example, the Leadership Code Commission charged a former finance minister with official misconduct involving conflict of interest.

### Political corruption

There are several political parties, but they are often weak and non-ideological (Larmour 2005). Alliances are driven more by personal ties and clan identity than a strict political agenda with frequent changing of political affiliations, making political coalition building fluid and unstable (Freedom House 2016). Against such a background, politicians are often under pressure to offer favours to voters, or offer inducements to legislators to sustain coalitions in parliament (Larmour 2005). Of the respondents to the 2013 GCB, 52% felt that political parties were corrupt or extremely corrupt, followed by parliamentarians (48%), making parliament one of the institutions perceived as most corrupt after the police (85%).

While previous elections had been marred by flawed voter rolls, bribery allegations, fraudulent ballots, ballot box theft and voter intimidations, voters and candidates accepted the results of the 2014 elections (Freedom House 2016), and observers considered them generally free and fair, although there were incidents of vote buying (US Department of State 2015).

It is not uncommon for parliamentarians and lawmakers to pass laws that benefit them and their relatives. In 2013, the government faced public pressure and was forced to withdraw a law that would have granted former prime ministers and their spouses monthly pensions, free housing, free healthcare and other benefits. In 2015, the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission granted lifetime pension payments to all lawmakers as well as a tax-free status on their salaries (Freedom House 2016).

Another area of concern in the country is the “constituency development funds” (CDF), which are funds set aside for MPs to direct towards development in their electorates. These funds represent quite a significant amount of money – amounting to some (US\$47.6 million), just over one third of the 2015 consolidated development budget. The Solomon Islands legislation specifically covering CDFs is notably shorter and less detailed than comparable legislation in other parts of the world and, in the absence of anything other than basic accounting requirements, MPs develop their own systems for managing CDFs. There are many issues raised around transparency, accountability, corruption and waste, effectiveness, the proper role of MPs, and the extent to which CDFs influence the political behaviour of voters at elections and of MPs. (Batley 2015). There are concerns that these funds tend to be used as slush funds and kick-backs to constituents who support them.

Like other small island states, nepotism and cronyism are important areas of concern, due to the smallness of the country, where “everybody knows everybody”. Family and kin are central to the political dynamics, especially in contexts where politicians face the “insatiable” demands of supporters and constituents and numerous financial obligations from family and kin, compelling them to pursue alternate income streams (Corbett 2013). In January 2015, the chief justice publicly acknowledged these challenges and urged the new government to stop the appointment of “cronies” to key positions (Freedom House 2016).

## 2. Corruption in natural resource management

Fishing, forestry and agriculture are the principal productive sectors contributing to the Solomon Islands’ economy. As forest reserves are depleted (in part due to corruption), large-scale mining and exploiting the country’s reserves of gold, bauxite

and nickel is envisaged as the Solomon Islands’ economic future (Messick 2016a).

### Logging

Logging accounts for about 16% of GDP and represents the largest source of export revenues (50%-70%) (World Bank 2014; Katovai et al. 2015). Yet, corruption among logging companies and local politicians has contributed to excessive logging, resulting in highly degraded forests that undermine the future sustainability of the sector. The logging industry is tightly imbricated with domestic politics, with successive governments infiltrated by logging money, and the benefits of logging largely captured by foreign companies and local politicians (Porter and Allen 2015). These political allies of logging companies have little incentive to regulate the sector, weakening the state’s ability to defend national interests as opposed to logging interests. Several prominent politicians and government officers have been associated with illegal practices and charged with illegal conduct (Katovai et al. 2015).

The approval process also reveals serious shortcomings. Logging permits are approved by the community with a government official overseeing the process. Due to geographical and resource constraints, the government cannot afford to send officials to maintain regular presence and oversight. The decision process is in the hands of modestly paid officials who are occasionally sent to remote logging and mining areas and subject to little review or independent evaluation. Corruption risks are exacerbated by the fact that companies often pay public officials an “allowance” to cover travelling expenses in these areas (Messick 2016a).

On their side, logging companies have engaged in tax evasion and money laundering, and millions in logging revenues are evaded through under-reporting. Logging companies have been exposed for tax evasion, illegal logging, under-reporting of export volume, transfer pricing, informal agreements between buyers, altering species names (using species names with low market value) and bribery. Government officials are usually implicated in such high-profile corruption activities (Katovai et al. 2015).

Logging companies typically ignore the code of practice, with the Ministry of Forestry largely unable to enforce and penalise environmental crimes (Baines 2015). Poor monitoring of logging activities also contributes to excessive logging, as forest authorities lack the financial and human

resources to conduct effective monitoring. In addition, remote areas containing some of the largest timber stocks are difficult to access due to a lack of transportation and are neglected by the monitoring authorities (Katovai et al. 2015)

## Mining

Observers expect similar corruption challenges in the mining sector, as the country is expected to transition from logging to a minerals-based economy in coming years, and extensive prospective activities are already taking place across the archipelago. Three issues, already observed in the logging sector, are likely to be exacerbated as mining activities develop (Porter and Allen 2015):

- opacity and dispute of the deal-making/licensing process
- challenges/disruption of the local social order
- grievances about how revenues are shared and spent

These challenges have already been observed in current mining operations at Gold Ridge – until recently the only producing mine in the country – with disputes between the Guadalcanal province and the national government around questions of benefit-sharing. Operations have also been plagued by a series of corruption scandals, including allegations of improper payments made to an MP and serious irregularities in the management and disbursement of a large tranche of landowner royalties on the part of relevant ministries (Porter and Allen 2015)

Yet the current mining legal and policy frameworks are not adequately developed and there is a broad consensus in the literature that the Solomon Islands is unprepared to manage a minerals-based economy in the absence of a vision and development plan for the use of the country's natural resources. While the Mines and Minerals Act 1996 outlines a mineral development regulatory system, as of 2015, there was no national policy to provide an overarching guide for mineral development. Government agency capacities have not been strengthened and the Solomon Islands appear unprepared to avoid the political power and exploitation that foreign mining companies can exert on the country (Baines 2015).

As for logging activities, the approval process of mining operations is vulnerable to corruption risks. Foreign and well-capitalised companies are dealing with communities living under the poverty

lines and whose literacy rates are frequently low. Bribery of local chiefs and community leaders to support applications for mining licences is common practice. Once the licence is granted, the company kicks back shares of the profit to these local "supporters". This can take the form of a Solomon Island corporation established in the local's name. Regional or central government officials can also be bribed to issue such mining licences (Messick 2016a).

To address such challenges and gain some international respectability, the country applied to the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#) in 2011 and became a member in 2012 but is not yet compliant. In fact, the first audit report of payments made by extractive companies revealed such serious shortcomings that they made the verification process impossible (Baines 2015).

## 3. Governance structures and anti-corruption efforts in the Solomon Islands

### Overview

The government has recognised the corruption challenges facing the country and the management of national resources and is committed to address it. The National Development Strategy 2016-2035 makes controlling corruption in logging and mining a priority, calling for a tightening up of anti-bribery laws, creating a specialised anti-corruption agency and enacting accountability laws and new policies for the mining sector (Messick 2016a).

In September 2016, Prime Minister Massaneh Sogavare reaffirmed this commitment in a speech entitled "time to act aggressively, quickly on corruption" where he articulated his approach to the development and implementation of a national anti-corruption strategy (NACS). As well as delivering the NACS, he is committed to delivering an anti-corruption bill, a whistleblower protection bill, a freedom of information policy as a precursor to a right to information bill, as well as to reform and strengthen the electoral act, the political parties integrity act, the ombudsman and the Leadership Code Commission, during the current term of parliament (Messick 2016b).

Yet, anti-corruption efforts are hampered by weak government capacity, low level of state penetration, limited opportunities for public

participation as well as weak civil society capacity. According to 2013 GCB data, the credibility of the government's political will to effectively address the country's corruption challenges is limited, and 58% of citizens perceive government efforts against corruption as either ineffective (41%) or very ineffective (17%).

## Legal framework

### National legislation

Freedom of speech, press, worship, movement and association is guaranteed by the Solomon Islands' constitution.

According to Global Integrity 2012, the Solomon Islands has a moderate legal framework scoring 71 (on a 0 to 100 scale), but its implementation score is assessed as very weak.

The Leadership Code – which is a professional code of conduct and not a law – contains provisions that cover corrupt acts, including extortion, passive and active bribery, using public resources or confidential state information for private gain and money laundering, but it is not part of criminal law. Bribery of foreign officials is not covered by the Leadership Code (Global Integrity 2012). Recommendations have been made to strengthen the Leadership Code for some years and the prime minister committed to do so in his September 2016 speech. He also committed to enact an anti-corruption bill that will create an independent commission against corruption in charge of investigating and prosecuting corruption allegations.

All leaders, ministers, members of the national legislature and members of the national-level judiciary as covered by the Leadership Code are required to file financial disclosure statements every two years, including gifts and hospitalities. However, financial disclosure statements are neither made available to the public nor subject to independent auditing (Global Integrity 2012).

There is no whistleblower protection law in the Solomon Islands, although it is expected to be developed simultaneously with the anti-corruption bill.

There is no law providing for public access to government information, although, as already mentioned, the prime minister committed to develop a freedom of information policy to pave

the way towards the enactment of a right to information bill.

As already mentioned, frequent changing of party affiliation based on personal ties and clan identities has a destabilising impact on government (Freedom House 2016). The shallowness of political alliances creates incentives for MPs to pursue short-term political alliances and parochial agendas rather than long-term public interests (Porter and Allen 2015). To address this situation and encourage a stronger party system through more formalised registration mechanisms, the Political Party Integrity Act was passed in May 2014, streamlining the process of registering, de-registering and merging political parties, which has not yielded the expected results (Freedom House 2016). The prime minister committed in his speech to reform and strengthen this act during the current term of parliament.

### International legislation

The Solomon Islands has acceded to UNCAC and endorsed the ADB/OECD Anti-Corruption Initiative in 2012. The Solomon Islands is one of the 11 UN members which is not yet a party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC).

## Institutional framework

The institutional framework to combat corruption needs to be strengthened and the major "integrity" agencies – Leadership Code Commission, ombudsman and auditor general – need greater legal powers to better target corruption (Global Integrity 2012). The prime minister has committed to address these challenges in his September 2016 speech.

### Leadership Code Commission

The Office of the Leadership Code Commission is in charge of implementing the Leadership Code and investigates misconduct involving MPs or senior civil servants. If it finds conclusive evidence of misconduct, it refers the matter to the Department of Public Prosecution (see below), which may proceed with legal charges. It has the power to screen certain cases of misconduct and apply fines of up to Solomon Island \$5,000 (US\$696) for MPs or senior civil servants. It lacks adequate funds to carry out its mandate (US Department of State 2015). In practice, no leader has been dismissed from office by the Leadership Code Commission (Global Integrity 2012).

According to Global Integrity 2012, the Leadership Code Commission shares funding with the ombudsman's office and the auditor general's office and use that funding, provided by the governments of Australia and New Zealand, for joint capacity development, payment of utility bills and training programmes conducted as joint commitments.

### **Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP)**

The public prosecutor is in charge of prosecuting public officials for breaches of the criminal law, including corruption. The Helpdesk could not unearth an assessment of the capacity, operations and effectiveness of the DPP in addressing corruption within the framework of this query.

### **Office of the Ombudsman**

The Office of the Ombudsman is a constitutional office reporting to parliament and is responsible for investigating public complaints of government maladministration. The ombudsman can only make recommendations to parliament. As with the Leadership Code Commission, the ombudsman rarely makes its reports public and does not give details of corruption hearings or reasons for decisions (Global Integrity 2012).

The ombudsman is appointed by the governor-general, upon the advice of a committee consisting of the speaker of parliament, the chairman of the Public Service Commission and the chairman of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission. The ombudsman may be removed from office only if he is unable to discharge the functions of the office or if he misbehaves, following the procedure for removing a judge from the high court.

While recruitments are fairly advertised in the media and the office's operations are generally free from political interference, the office lacks sufficient human and financial resources to carry out effective investigations (Global Integrity 2012).

### **The Auditor General**

According to the constitution, the auditor general is appointed by the governor-general, acting in accordance with the advice of the Public Service Commission and is responsible for auditing and reporting annually on the public accounts of the Solomon Islands, of all ministries, offices, courts and authorities of the government, of the

government of Honiara city and of all provincial governments. The constitution guarantees independence through the appointment process and explicitly protects the office from dismissal for political purposes or political interference of any other person or authority. According to Global Integrity 2012, the Office of the Ombudsman is free from political interference or control in practice too. Although lacking sufficient human resources, audit staff members are recruited, internally trained and professionally experienced. The office produces several audit reports annually, reflecting its independence in providing oversight for checks and balances. However, in many cases, the government does not act on the findings of the auditor general (Global Integrity 2012).

### **The police forces**

The Solomon Islands has no specific anti-corruption agency. The police can investigate allegations of criminal corruption, and the public prosecutor has sole authority to prosecute criminal charges. The police's full powers to investigate acts of criminal corruption are hindered by a lack of technical capacity, personnel and funding as well as abuse of power (Freedom House 2015). The result is that there have been very few successful prosecutions for corruption or similar acts in the Solomon Islands (Global Integrity 2012). Historically, the police force lacks training, suffers from factional and ethnic rivalries, and is criticised for police violence and brutality (Freedom House 2016).

### **Judiciary**

The judiciary in practice is independent of the executive, even though there are no express legal provisions guaranteeing the independence of the courts. Staffing, procurement and budgets are administered through government ministries (Global Integrity 2012). A lack of resources hinders the conduct of fair and timely trials (Freedom House 2016).

While courts are open to everyone, they are located in urban centres and, in practice, citizens living remotely from urban and central areas may lack access to the justice systems (Global Integrity 2012).

There are non-state local systems of rendering justice, the "kastom" system, which is typically equated with the "authority of chiefs", is a traditional grievance and dispute resolution system commonly used in rural the Solomon

Islands. All existing institutional mechanisms, including the court system, are unable to deal effectively with logging disputation and the kastom system has been severely undermined by the entanglement of chiefs in logging activities, as mentioned above, which undermines the legitimacy of this dispute resolution mechanism (World Bank 2013).

## Other actors

### Media

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respects these rights. The government also does not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority (US Department of State 2015). Freedom House 2014 supports this assessment and assesses the press status as free, with a fairly stable and diverse media landscape.

However, defamation is a criminal offence and authorities have threatened in the past or pressed defamation charges against the press. There is also a certain degree of self-censorship arising from the threat of compensation for media content deemed offensive (Freedom House 2014).

### Civil society

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly and association, and the government generally respects these rights. While demonstrators must obtain permits, the government usually grants them, and civil society groups operate without interference (Freedom House 2016).

There are no practical restrictions regarding political association, and non-governmental organisations like Transparency Solomon Islands may choose to legally incorporate to facilitate its operations or not, without undermining their operations and suffering from government intimidation (Global Integrity 2012).

According to the 2015 report on human rights practices, the government criticised the work of the anti-corruption advocacy group Forum Solomon Islands International and accused the group of being politically motivated in a public statement to parliament, which led to criticism of the government in social media (US Department of State 2015).

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