Solomon Islanders withdraw from colonialism ("Maasina Rule"), 1944-52

Time period notes: Beginning and end dates are inexact—the campaign grew slowly out of a series of meetings, peaked, then slowly declined in membership and influence.

1944 to: 1952

Country: Solomon Islands
Location City/State/Province: Maasina Rule began on the island of Malaita, then spread to Guadalcanal, Santa Isabel, Ulawa and San Cristobal

Goals:
The original goal of Maasina Rule was to create indigenous-led economic development and self-government outside of the purview of the colonial state.

Other explicitly stated economic goals included an increase in pay for plantation labor from £1 to £12 per month, and reform of the labor contract system.

Finally, as the campaign evolved, indigenous representation in government became a priority for Maasina Rule leaders.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 125. Boycott of government employment and positions
• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 090. Revenue refusal
• 125. Boycott of government employment and positions
• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 4th segment:
• 090. Revenue refusal
• 125. Boycott of government employment and positions
• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

• 174. Establishing new social patterns
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Notes on Methods:
Following mass arrests in 1948 and 1949 (segments 3 and 4), the labor recruitment boycott and tax refusal tactics were abandoned by most Maasina Rule members, but some continued to use them. I have not included these tactics in segments 5 and 6 to signal their steep decline in usage.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• indigenous Solomon Islanders

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Maasina Rule's infrastructure included a hierarchical system of self-government, so there were many individual leaders.

Partners:
Not known
External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Villagers on Malaita

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Villagers on Guadalcanal
- Villagers on San Cristobal
- Villagers on Santa Isabel
- Villagers on Ulawa

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1.5 years

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
British colonial government of Solomon Islands

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Maasina Rule leaders were imprisoned for up to three years, though the grounds for their convictions were very dubious. Members who refused to pay the head tax were also repeatedly jailed, with the intent of breaking the Maasina Rule system.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
0 points out of 1 point

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaign was successful in fermenting economic development and "brotherhood" (Maasina) among Solomon Islanders, who had previously been fragmented. Campaigners also succeeded in urging the colonial administration to reform plantation conditions and change breaches of contract from a criminal to civil offense. Finally, they succeeded in establishing an island-wide indigenous council on Malaita. However, they did not succeed in gaining equal pay as Europeans, and the Maasina Rule movement ultimately dissolved.

The Maasina Rule parallel governmental infrastructure dissolved after 1952.

Maasina Rule grew from one corner of Malaita to include a majority of all indigenous Solomon Islanders, including upwards of 90% on Malaita.
As on many Pacific islands, the British colonial rulers of the Solomon Islands set up an economy based on an inter-island trade in indigenous labor. Islanders were often just as happy to avoid the labor trade and continue living in their traditional subsistence economy, so the British instituted coercive methods to encourage people to work on plantations and, during World War II, in military industries. One of these methods was a strict indentured labor system that prohibited laborers from removing themselves from contracts once signed. The other was a head tax on all citizens, regardless of labor status, that provided a need for income. The coercive nature of the labor trade was a matter of intense resentment among islanders. Prior to WWII, labor actions had been directed at employers, but islanders understood that the system was rooted in the colonial government that enforced contract laws and the head tax.

The seeds of Maasina Rule were planted on the island of Malaita, where most of the labor trade was based, in 1943 or 1944. Three of the founders, young men named Jonathan Fifi’i and Nori and Aliki Nono’oohimae, served in the Solomon Islands Labor Corps, which supported the WWII effort. In this job, they talked with American servicemen who encouraged them to organize for their own benefit. In addition, they were influenced by the seemingly equal status enjoyed by black and white American servicemen, which undercut racist British justifications for colonialism. Fifi’i and the two Nono'oohimae worked with older leaders to develop a system for development that was based on collective, autonomous action among islanders. This included recording of local traditions, building of new towns, agricultural efforts, and a hierarchical system of local, indigenous-led governments. By 1946, this program for advancement, entirely removed from British authority, had spread to the islands of Guadalcanal, Santa Isabel, Ulawa, and San Cristobal, with overwhelming support and organization in each location. Sometime in the process of expansion, the movement came to be known as “Maasina Rule” (Brotherhood Rule).

After the end of the war in 1945, Maasina Rule leaders announced a ban on labor recruiting on Malaita until indigenous wages were raised from £1 to £12 per month, which was the pay rate for Europeans. This recruiting boycott caused a serious labor shortage that prevented plantations from returning to business as usual following the war.

The colonial government entered into negotiations with local leaders, but refused to entertain proposals for a wage increase for indentured laborers or grant the Maasina Rule movement any official recognition. Instead, it tried to break the recruitment boycott in February 1947 by hiring a crew of workers in Malaita. In response, Maasina Rule leaders threatened a one-day strike of all indigenous employees on Malaita. The strike did not come to fruition due to warnings it would be illegal, and a resultant division of opinion among Maasina Rule members.

Following this event, there was an important turnover in the British administration. District Commissioner Eustace Sanders, who had been willing to negotiate with Maasina Rule, if not grant any concessions, left the Solomons, and a harsher successor arrived. The replacement ceased negotiations and arrested 253 Maasina Rule leaders and accomplices in autumn 1947. Most were released without charges, but 23 were tried and convicted for “unlawful combination and confederacy,” and sentenced to 1-6 years in jail. Prior to the arrests, the British had not alluded that Maasina Rule was illegal in the slightest; indeed, Maasina Rule leaders had called off the planned strike because it would have broken the law.

Rather than impede the movement, the leaders’ conviction and imprisonment only strengthened Maasina Rule. Islanders continued the recruitment boycott and built fences around their villages to further distance themselves from the colonial administration. The British authorities seem to have taken a multifaceted approach to stifle the movement. On one hand, it passed reforms to improve the conditions of plantation employment and change the penalty for breach of labor contracts from a criminal to civil offense. These reforms were mandated by new international labor conventions to which Britain was subject, but the colonial administration had hesitated to implement them prior to the strengthening of Maasina Rule. In addition, members of Maasina Rule were appointed to the Melanesian Wages Advisory Board.

On the other hand, even as they appeased Maasina Rule with these measures, the British decided to reassert their authority by holding a census and introducing a new tax. The local population refused to comply with each of these mandates. Non-compliance led the British to arrest thousands of islanders in 1948 and 1949 and hand out punitive terms of imprisonment. Mass imprisonment led to a shortage of Maasina Rule members to run the community farms, and so the autonomous villages struggled to feed themselves. By late 1949, many villagers were paying the tax to avoid another arrest. Around the same time, the
recruiting boycott in Malaita ended.

Once the recruiting boycott was broken, the British administration stopped the day-to-day harassment of Maasina Rule members and released the leaders that had been imprisoned since 1947. Having won improvements in labor conditions, many islanders left the autonomous Maasina Rule villages and returned migrant labor. Maasina Rule did not die out, however; some groups retreated into the interior of Malaita and continued living outside the grasp of the labor trade. Only with the official establishment of the first island-wide indigenous council on Malaita in 1952 did the last Maasina Rule groups withdraw their demands.

Research Notes

Influences:
American servicemen stationed in the Solomons during World War Two encouraged Solomon Islanders to organize and improve their condition. (1)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Other sources for further information (not consulted by the author of this case study):


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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
William Lawrence, 12/3/2011

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