

“Computer Scandal Shock!” was the headline that greeted many Solomon Islanders when they woke up on July 19, 2008. The Solomon Star newspaper broke the story of how a local company that won the contract to supply computers for 14 secondary schools in rural Solomon Islands failed to do so. The newspaper reported that Taiwan provided SI\$4.9 million (US\$634,000) for the project, deposited directly into the firm’s bank account by the Ministry of Finance through the Central Bank of Solomon Islands. To date, according to records, the company only supplied one laptop, to Su’u Secondary School in Malaita.

Many Solomon Islanders were indeed shocked, not that there was possible collusion and corruption in the tendering process — that’s old news, many say — but at the amount involved. “These people are becoming too greedy,” was the whisper making the rounds in the street corners of Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. It was as if there was a certain amount of greediness that was excusable, even acceptable. Many questions were raised as to why such a large project was awarded to a relatively small computer company. The tender board has come under increasing pressure to explain how the project was awarded, and other computer suppliers said they were not even aware until it made the headlines that such a project was up for tender.

It is not difficult to see how the tender process could be an easy target for corruption. Established prior to independence, the public tender system has three channels, all with different levels of discretion vested on public officers. Projects costing less than SI\$50,000 (US\$6,500) only require approval from the permanent secretary (PS) of the ministry concerned. Those between SI\$50,000 and SI\$500,000 (US\$65,000) are deliberated on by the Ministry Tender Board (MTB). The MTB consists of the PS, who is the chair, the chief accountant and divisional heads. Finally, those projects exceeding SI\$500,000 are considered by the Central Tender Board (CTB). The CTB consists of the PS of finance, who is the chair, and four other ministerial permanent secretaries.

Generally speaking, it is clear that government officers at all levels are granted too much discretion, exposing them to temptations. This is not to say that all of these boards are corrupt; many function effectively under strong administrative leadership. However, the fact remains that in the Solomon Islands, the tendering of government projects and programs has been tainted with corruption for

a long time and it has almost become an acceptable approach to doing business.

Many close to the tendering process say that the word *corruption* has been replaced by less “demeaning words.” “Everybody is calling it *lunch money* nowadays. ... It’s not a bribe, so it is not corruption, just lunch money,” said a senior government officer who preferred to remain anonymous. “Those in most of these tender boards have a system where they predetermine who gets a contract, and this is based largely on what they could offer board members, or a selected few, ... lunch money, that is,” the officer said. “Many board members have people on the outside who, in most cases, approach contractors and basically find out how much lunch money they are willing to fork out. ... To be quite honest, I have heard of contractors who have been pushed to the point that they have to factor in lunch money in all their proposals.” That basically means inflating their project proposals, with some said to be as high as 30 percent.

Another government officer, also familiar with the tender process and who also wished to remain anonymous, said another body established to complement the work of these tender boards also has become tainted with corruption. The government officer said that the Tender Evaluation Committee (TEC) was established to provide the technical work for the tender boards. Its members assess projects and programs and their costs before they are opened up for public tender. “Those in TEC often sell inside information to contractors and, depending on the project, payments demanded range from as low as SI\$3,000 (US\$390) to SI\$30,000 (US\$3,900).” The same government officer has witnessed money changing hands, saying that people do it quite casually, sometimes over betel nut, a traditional fruit consumed by many Solomon Islanders. Asked why he has not raised the issue with his boss, the officer casually replied, “It is difficult to know who to trust. Payments go all the way to the top.” The officer said corruption in the TEC and the various tender boards is so well organized it is difficult to notice that anything is wrong. “There is a strong network between all these public officers and contractors, so they cover their tracks well.”

Transparency Solomon Islands has continuously called on the government to curb such behavior, asserting that the bidding process has been compromised and has become unfair. The head of Transparency Solomon Islands, Jean Tafoa, says there are many honest business people who fall out in the bidding process because they just do not want to be party to corruption. She says that scenario gives rise to incompetent contractors who will only produce substandard results. One does not need to look far for

evidence of that, as many projects awarded by these tender boards have failed to be completed satisfactorily or at all. TSI says fixing the bidding process is a huge challenge that needs to be addressed urgently. “I think people are no longer shocked at such corrupt practices, they are just becoming tired and frustrated,” Tafoa said. “It’s a sad story for Solomon Islanders, our own people are betraying the trust that we place on them.”

While the computer scandal is one that made the news, there are many other projects that have not made the headlines but have suffered similar fate. Corruption in the tendering process has had far-reaching consequences to the people of Solomon Islands. This is evident with the quality of workmanship of buildings, roads and other infrastructure built haphazardly throughout Honiara.

When one thinks about possible solutions, it is hard not to think of what one of our informants said of corruption: It goes “all the way to the top.” While there are many corrupt officers within the public service, there are also many decent, hard-working public servants who silently disapprove of such practices. The media, civil society and nongovernment organizations have an important role to play to ensure that those who are honest are able to speak up and have the courage to do so. The exposure of the computer scandal is a good start. It has made many corrupt officials uncomfortable, and it is the hope of many that more can be done to make them feel even more uncomfortable. With the computer scandal in the headlines, many are hoping that people will come forward and expose corrupters. The whole country is watching for the outcome of the computer saga, hoping that those that have for too long toyed with millions of taxpayer dollars are named and shamed publicly.

