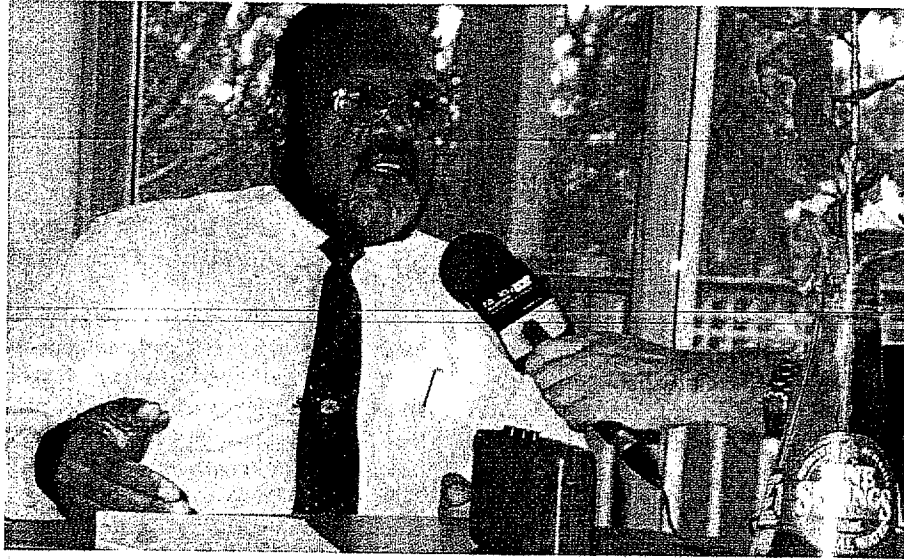


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Edward Natapei...set to return as prime minister.

UNCERTAINTY PREVAILS AFTER VANUATU POLLS

But PM Natapei confident to retain post

BY ROBERT KEITH-REID

Vanuatu's French born former controversial Ombudsman and half a dozen small new parties were fresh ingredients to add to the uncertainty of the outcome of voting for a new 52-member parliament by 127,117 registered voters on May 3.

By May 20, as *Pacific Magazine* went to press the release of poll figures was still being delayed.

However, the outgoing coalition government of the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) and Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) were each claiming 14 to 15 seats. Prime Minister Edward Natapei (VP) said he was confident of retaining leadership of the nation with UMP leader and foreign minister, Serge Vohor.

Preliminary results showed that nine government and 10 opposition MPs have lost their seats, with the National United Party leaders, secretary-general, Willy Jimmy and president Dinh Van Than, saying that they would resign their offices because of the party's dismal performance in los-

ing at least four of the 12 seats held by it.

With a record 261 candidates, a record 15 political parties, many of them new, and 69 independent candidates, the election was a cocktail of typically convoluted, intense, and personal Melanesian politics, capable of producing unexpected results for a small country with an economy weakened by years of blatant high level political corruption.

As a former Ombudsman, Marie Noelle Ferrieux-Patterson produced scathing detailed reports in which she named several prime ministers and cabinet ministers, all standing in the election, as being so corrupt that they should never be allowed to stand for any public office again.

Her targets included Vohor, former prime ministers Barak Sope and Maxime Carlot Korman, and former finance minister, Willy Jimmy.

Ferrieux-Patterson, now involved with the branch of anti-corruption Transparency International organisation, formed recently in Port Vila, stood independently for one of the six Port Vila seats. As the poll

approached, she was getting telephone death threats from locals resentful of her record as Ombudsman and French expatriate background.

Sope, ousted by Natapei in April 2001 with a parliamentary no-confidence vote after corruption allegations, is awaiting trial on charges that as prime minister he signed government guarantees for US\$23 million for a Thai businessman, Amendra Ghosh, appointed by him as a honorary consul in Thailand.

Ghosh gave the Sope Government what he said was the world's largest ruby, worth US\$174 million, as security for loan raising. After a recent valuation, the former finance minister, Joe Carlo, said the 80-kilogramme rock was virtually worthless.

However, Sope, who has a strong traditional Melanesian power base in his home Port Vila area, was considered very likely to retain his seat. He is capable of capturing at least some renewal of power in the next government by allying his small Melanesian Progressive Party with other parties.

Prime Minister Natapei and a former prime minister Maxime Carlot Korman, also contested Port Vila seats. In the build-up to the election, the present Ombudsman, Hannington Alatoa exclaimed that the failure of Vanuatu authorities to follow up about 90 damning reports that detailed corruption involving top political figures was a "national disgrace".

"It affects the integrity of the state," he said. "How long can the Vanuatu government go on lying and paying lip-service to public reports issued."

Alatoa said Natapei took power promising transparent government. "But sadly once again absolutely nothing has happened. Unfortunately, politics in Vanuatu come first."

Past elections in Vanuatu, which achieved independence from joint British and French rule in 1980, are followed by two to three weeks of intense backstage lobbying for support before a new coalition government is formed.

Vanuatu has an economy based on tourism, exports of copra, small amounts of coffee, kava, cocoa and beef, revenue from its Port Vila tax haven centre and foreign aid. ■