



# Political fragmentation and the policy environment in Vanuatu, 1980–2004

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This article charts the broad shifts in Vanuatu's policy environment caused by progressive political fragmentation over the past 24 years. Recent electoral returns show an upsurge in support for independents and minor parties with strong local credibility, suggesting a move away from the 'big-picture' politics of the 1970s and 1980s, and a shift away from the major parties.

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Previously known as the New Hebrides, until 1980 the Republic of Vanuatu was administered jointly by France and Britain under the Anglo-French Condominium created in 1914. The system created bifurcated colonial structures, including policing, legal and administrative systems (MacClancy 1980, 1981, van Trease 1995). Conducted largely by the Christian missions, education also created linguistic divisions within and between ni-Vanuatu communities, with Marists undertaking most of their education in French, while the protestant religions used English as the language of education (Miles 1998). Given the strong colonial rivalries between the United Kingdom and France, the social cleavages created by colonialism were

often replicated in the Melanesian societies in the New Hebrides (Miles 1994). These tendencies inflected the emergent political culture of the archipelago, as politically active ni-Vanuatu gravitated towards either the Anglophone or Francophone-dominated parties (Miles 1994, Molisa, Vurobaravu and van Trease 1982).<sup>1</sup>

## Party polarisation, 1971–88

From the beginning of the 1970s until the late 1980s, Vanuatu's political landscape was characterised by the above-mentioned polarities. Originally named the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP), the



Vanua'aku Pati was formed in Santo in 1971 by members of the Anglican and Presbyterian clergy, junior British Administration bureaucrats and teachers (Plant 1977). In 1977, in line with its nationalist agenda, the NHNP under the leadership of Anglican cleric, Father Walter Lini, was renamed the Vanua'aku Pati (Our Land Party). From the mid 1970s onwards, the party pressed for the rapid decolonisation of the New Hebrides through a concerted program of demonstrations and political agitation (Plant 1977, MacClancy 1981). Like nationalist parties elsewhere in the decolonising world, the Vanua'aku Pati was determined to maintain the territorial integrity of the New Hebrides, post-colony, despite the emergence of federalist movements in the southern and northern islands, fomented by foreign agents (Beasant 1984, Bonnemaïson 1986). When the Vanua'aku Pati won the 1979 national elections, fought over the issue of independence and who would lead the New Hebrides afterwards, these groups attempted open secession. With support from the British colonial administration, Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand, the Lini administration suppressed the rebellions. Because many French *colons* supported the revolts and because the French metropolitan government and colonial administration were seen to be complicit in their planning (Beasant 1984, Leder 1981), the Vanua'aku Pati adopted an anti-French stance in the early 1980s, culminating in the expulsion of the French ambassador in 1981.

Integral to the Vanua'aku Pati's original platform was the return of alienated land, the development of Vanuatu and respect for *kastom* as the basis of national cohesion. Initially, this was conceived under the rubric of 'Melanesian socialism' (Premdas 1987), but it dovetailed with the emerging discourse on the Melanesian Way, articulated most clearly by the Papua New Guinea lawyer Bernard Narokobi (Otto 1997). Vanua'aku

Pati foreign policy was based on its membership of the Non-Aligned Movement and involved advocacy for the decolonisation of the remaining Melanesian colonies (West Papua and New Caledonia) and a rejection of cold war alliances. In practice, this policy allowed it to play off one foreign power against another in an attempt to leverage better funding. In the decade after independence, Vanuatu offered fishing rights to the Soviet Union and brokered trade or training relations with Cuba and Libya (Albinski 1995), threatening ANZUS policy imperatives in the Southwest Pacific. After the ending of the cold war, Vanua'aku Pati gravitated towards political centrism.

The UMP began its existence at independence as an amalgam of groups opposed to the majority Vanua'aku Pati. Principal among its constituent groups were the urban *Union Communautaire des Nouvelles Hebrides* (UCNH) and the *Mouvement Autonomiste des Nouvelles-Hebrides* (MANH), both formed in 1973. The party also attracted support from the Tan Union on Pentecost, Namangki Aute from Malakula, former Nagriamel supporters in Santo, Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo, and from Jon Frum and other social movements in Tanna and the southern islands. The groups renamed themselves the UMP in 1981, arguably to distance themselves from the stigma attached to the rebellion (Boulekone 1995).

What unified the UMP was their opposition to the Vanua'aku Pati's rigid centralism. Indeed, despite accepting some level of decentralisation into their platform in the late 1970s (Ghai 1988), the Vanua'aku Pati was opposed to incorporating it fully on the grounds that it would legitimise the agendas of their federalist and secessionist political opponents. The Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), by comparison, favoured greater regional autonomy; a policy borne out of its fragmented origins. For the first decade after independence, therefore, Vanuatu's



political blocs could be delineated into federalist and centralist camps, in addition to the basic Francophone/Anglophone divide.

### **Political fragmentation, 1988–97**

Beginning in 1988, however, the political stability that characterised Vanuatu politics began to erode, as leadership challenges within the Vanua'aku Pati provoked two major factional splits. In 1988, a faction allied to Barak Sope, the Vanua'aku Pati parliamentary whip, defected after disagreements over land policy sparked rioting in Port Vila. In 1991, the founder of the party, Father Walter Lini, defected when senior Vanua'aku Pati members attempted to wrest him of the leadership after he suffered a stroke. The defections split the anglophone vote and consequently the Vanua'aku Pati lost office in 1991. Thereafter, coalitions became necessary vehicles for the formation of government, but they have often proved precarious, being plagued by fierce infighting and competition over ministerial posts.

Fragile coalition governments are often forced to 'horse trade' to maintain their hold on power and opposition parties readily accept ministerial posts, parliamentary committee positions or parliamentary offices (such as Speaker) as inducements. Coalition member parties engage in frenetic efforts to progress upwardly within governments, mostly with the intention of claiming the prized post of Prime Minister or one of the other preferred portfolios. Largely, opposition members are denied access to government resources, leading to their often frantic attempts to rejoin the government ranks. These tendencies necessarily propel political centrifugalism within the parliamentary parties and, therefore, within the national parliament. A situation has arisen in which both opposition and government coalitions

are intrinsically frail. Failure to provide desirable positions to coalition members can result in loss of government. Even the slightest shift in power in parliament can initiate a complete reorganisation of ruling coalitions, such as occurred between 1995 and 1997 (Morgan 1998).

The major casualties of national political manoeuvring during the 1990s were parliamentary oversight, law making, and durable policy formation and implementation—especially with relation to macroeconomic policy (Asian Development Bank 1998, 2003). In periods of intense political instability, policy formulation, even at its most fundamental level, was subordinated to horsetrading. For example, between his inauguration as Minister of Finance in February 1996 and his eventual dismissal from Cabinet in mid 1997, Barak Sope failed to provide a development budget or an annual budget (*Vanuatu Weekly*, 10 August 1996:2). More recently, it has become apparent that the regular incapacitation of parliamentary sessions in the 1990s contributed to the dominance of the legislature by an unaccountable executive (Morgan 2001). With public scrutiny diverted by a succession of political dramas, several short-lived governments stripped state coffers and sold off state assets, often to themselves as private citizens (Vanuatu, Ombudsman 1995). During the mid 1990s, corruption became a primary means of advancement for government members of parliament, particularly those who sought to augment their own wealth with resources misappropriated from the state.

### **The reform agenda, 1997–2004**

In early 1997, Vanuatu was virtually bankrupted and Serge Vohor, then UMP Prime Minister, began the implementation of the Comprehensive Reform Programme



(CRP), supported by the Asian Development Bank and foreign aid donors. According to its authors, the CRP was the blueprint by which the 'poor performance of the institutions of government' would be rectified through the strengthening of the Office of the Ombudsman and the enactment of a Leadership Code (Vanuatu 1997).

The implementation of the CRP quickly became a cleavage around which the parties mobilised for electoral support. Fuelled by reports of the negative impact of structural adjustment programs in Papua New Guinea and the widespread pessimism about Westminster democracy in Vanuatu, the belief that the CRP might endanger the sovereignty of ni-Vanuatu people became an enduring theme in political rhetoric. Barak Sope, the leader of the Melanesian Progressive Party, has stated that the CRP would cause suffering to the people of Vanuatu and 'serves the interests of Australia and New Zealand', although in office he has been forced to grant the project tacit support (*Trading Post* 19 May 2001, 17 September 1997).

Despite being grounded in sound economic principles, many reforms undertaken under the auspices of the CRP have proved extremely unpopular among ni-Vanuatu. On taking office in 1998, the Kalpokas government (Vanua'aku Pati/National United Party) inherited a deficit estimated to be four billion vatu (US\$34 million), forcing it to accept a US\$22 million tied loan from the Asian Development Bank, earmarked for the reduction of the bureaucracy and the implementation of guidelines for public servants. However, domestically, Kalpokas was criticised for the slow pace of reform and the lack of visible indicators of economic growth. Rural constituents voiced concern over the introduction of the value-added tax, which they felt benefited urban dwellers and Chinese (*sinois*) merchants more than them.

In November 1999, with dwindling parliamentary support, the Kalpokas government resigned from office rather than face a motion of no-confidence.

It was replaced by the coalition government of Barak Sope. Between his accession in 1999 and his ouster in April 2001, Sope undertook several perilous financial deals in the hope of pulling Vanuatu quickly from the brink of financial disaster, rather than the lengthier and politically unpopular process of institutional reform. The most prominent involved Amerendra Nath Ghosh, who arrived in Port Vila in February 2000 with what was described as 'possibly the world's largest ruby', which he intended to 'donate' to the people of Vanuatu. Ghosh promised to initiate a project to seal the road around Efate, build a walled complex for the Council of Ministers, and negotiate with foreign consortia to build a new international airport (*Nasara*, 14 April 2001). In return for the ruby, it was reported that Ghosh was to receive US\$300 million in bearer bonds from the Reserve Bank, equal to 140 per cent of Vanuatu's gross domestic product. Had Sope issued the bonds, Vanuatu's total debt would have quadrupled (*Australian Financial Review*, 26 February 2001). Sope lost power in the 2001. However, Barak Sope follows the original and still popular platform of the Vanua'aku Pati closely, advocating for the decolonisation of West Papua and championing an autonomist foreign policy. Trading on these issues and through his astute reading of constituency politics, Sope has positioned himself as one of Vanuatu's great political survivors. He has won a seat in every election he has contested.

Edward Natapei, the leader of the Vanua'aku Pati, then came to power as leader of a Vanua'aku Pati/UMP government coalition, committed to following through with its reform agenda. The continued survival of the Vanua'aku Pati/



UMP government coalition brought respite from the entrenched political instability of the 1990s, but key obstacles remained, principally poor public opinion of the CRP. By maintaining an emphasis on financial accountability and responsible leadership, Natapei signalled his intention to stamp out the form of maverick politics that Sope embodied, especially his record of economic mismanagement and possible corruption. Simultaneously, community pressure on members of parliament to distance themselves from the CRP was evident. In light of attacks from within the Vanua'aku Pati membership on the CRP, party leaders have proposed a much shorter list of achievable reform priorities and posited a much greater emphasis on grassroots people (*Trading Post*, 25 August 2001). Yet they remained committed to the basic precepts of the CRP, incorporating economic growth and public administration reform into the party platform in 2002 (*Trading Post*, 25 April 2002:3).

The 2002 elections were fought explicitly over the continuance of the Asian Development Bank-sponsored Comprehensive Reform Program (*Port Vila Presse*, 20 April 2002:1). The National United Party and the Melanesian Progressive Party campaigned against the CRP, stating that it was neo-colonial and designed to benefit western powers to the detriment of grassroots ni-Vanuatu. The Vanua'aku Pati regained power but throughout the term the government was criticised for its poor record of local development. Projects were seen to stagnate as the government prioritised stability and financial accountability, resulting in pressure for more rural development projects being exerted on government members of parliament. Parallel with the increasing emphasis on reform was growing disenchantment within the Vanua'aku Pati about its direction and policies. The aspirations of a generation of

younger members of parliament created splits within the party. Tension culminated in the early months of 2004, when three senior members of parliament, including former Prime Minister Donald Kalpokas, formed a dissident faction. Their split triggered the dissolution of parliament.

The 2004 elections resulted in one of Vanuatu's most fragmented parliaments. The elections were called to end political instability, but the major parties suffered severe losses. Several senior parliamentarians—including several ministers and the former Prime Minister, Donald Kalpokas—were voted out of office. In all, 23 sitting members lost their seats. Despite the recognition of the dangers of political instability by the major parties, the 2004 elections demonstrated the progressive 'balkanisation' of national parliaments and the possible death of big-issue politics, as voters appeared to favour locally credible social movements, minor parties and independents.

Political manoeuvring and the concomitant deterioration in service provision and policy formulation has disenchanted many ni-Vanuatu about Westminster style democracy. Key local leaders have argued that democratic government is leading Melanesian people inexorably to calamity. The apparent creation of divisions through politics suggests to many ni-Vanuatu the societal violence experienced in Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea (Morgan 2004). A former member of the national parliament in Vanuatu and now a regional non-government organisation director, Hilda Lini, attempted to capitalise on this belief when she called for the endorsement of a new, more indigenous form of governance in Vanuatu

[t]his outdated western system of democracy will continue to corrupt Melanesia, resulting in the continuous



uncontrolled crime, violence and poverty [and] ongoing crisis (*Port Vila Presse*, 27 October 2001).

Members of parliament are increasingly expected to provide access to resources and 'development' funds. Indeed, all members of parliament act as central nodes in networks of distribution and exchange focused on access to state resources. In turn, this generates incredible pressure for members of parliament to provide for their constituents (albeit mainly at election time). As a result, members of parliament are forced into frantic efforts to join government and gain access to the state's funds. This political economy has diverted the attention of members of parliament from their institutional roles as law makers, overseers of government, and representatives.

Local strategies to combat political instability are based on non-partisan local representation and are increasingly visible. The formation of Nevsem Nenparata, which won a seat in the 2004 elections, offers a case in point. The party prioritises local development and national unity and represents a local coalition between several of the federalist parties mentioned above. In Erromangan language, *nevsem nenparata* means 'to come together in peace' (*Port Presse Online*, 28 May 2004). The party incorporates local supporters of several political parties including the UMP and Melanesian Progressive Party who have pooled their electoral resources. Much of the impetus to form the party came from local chiefs who sought to end political infighting on Erromango and who were dissatisfied with the existing party system and the lack of interaction between members of parliament and their constituencies. In particular, the impetus for forming the alliance came from the fear that the government would potentially squander Erromomango's natural resources, including sandalwood, if there were no Erromangans in parliament to

protect them. At the movement's foundation, its organiser, Chief Mike Yori, stated

...before Independence, the chiefs held power and everything worked correctly. Immediately after Independence it was the Vanua'aku Pati which rules. Then the government split and everything deteriorated. Unity doesn't any longer seem possible with politics. Now we must go back to the chiefs and enable them to sort out how we can again find the pathway to unity (*Port Vila Presse Online*, 28 May 2004).

Inspired by widespread disillusionment with the Westminster-style system of government, such sentiments will only rise with further political instability. Yet local strategies such as Nevsem Nenparata are unlikely to stabilise the national parliament. Plausibly, developments such as these will result in the emergence of new forms of political party. Already, the Grin Pati (Green Party) acts as an umbrella for such groups. However, given that these strategies go hand in hand with calls for greater local representation in parliament, they contribute to the erosion of the support base of the major parties, which are often thought to subordinate local priorities to national ones. Given also the great desire for materials and resources in rural communities, most ni-Vanuatu have little option but to support members of parliament whose promises of largesse often appear more likely to be delivered than state programs. Moreover, given the geographic, ethnic and cultural diversity of Vanuatu, an increasing emphasis on local networks and local knowledge will in all likelihood create an equally diverse parliament with no unifying ideologies, the implausibility of Vanuatu's major political parties disappearing overnight notwithstanding. An enduring irony of Vanuatu politics, therefore, is that while public criticisms of the fragmented national



parliament, the profligacy of members of parliament and the apparent inertia of governments are commonplace, voters have discarded the major parties in favour of locally credible independent candidates or members of smaller parties. It is the increasing presence of independents and smaller parties that has intensified political instability.

### 2004 elections

The 2004 elections resulted in parliamentary representation being spread evenly between three medium-sized blocs, one with ten members (National United Party) and two with eight members (Vanua'aku Pati and UMP). Even if they were to join a coalition government, the combined numbers of the major parties total only 26, or one-half of the possible 52 seats in parliament. Independents and minor parties hold the remaining 26 seats. A (more or less) stable cabinet was formed in August 2004, incorporating five independents and 23 members of five parties (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 9 July 2004:2). Included in the cabinet is breakaway Vanua'aku Pati member for Tanna, Joe Natuman, who holds the Ministry of Education portfolio (*The Independent*, 7 Aug 2004:2). It is likely that the Vohor government will be subject to periodical instability because of its intensely fragmented nature.

Former Prime Minister Barak Sope was granted the ministry of foreign affairs, signalling Vohor's intention of rolling back certain parts of the CRP and adjusting the government's stance regarding its relations with Australia. Accepting large soft loans from the People's Republic of China, the Vohor government has become comfortable in resisting Australian policy imperatives, the good governance agenda, and core programs undertaken under the CRP, including strengthening Vanuatu's legal frameworks. Indeed, almost immediately after taking power, Vohor's cabinet mounted

attacks on the high number of foreign advisors in Vanuatu and criticised Australia as racist for its resistance to Melanesian labourers working in Australia (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 11 August 2004:2).<sup>2</sup> Over the past few years, gaining access to the Australian labour market has become popular political rhetoric. In early September, the government terminated the appointments of two senior AusAID consultant lawyers working in the State Law Office (Attorney General's Department) and expelled two Australian Federal Police liaison officers. It later rescinded this decision.

Given that Vohor and Sope's coalition is at present unwieldy and subject to fracture, their sabre-rattling must be understood as a strategy to unify their disparate coalition against a common adversary (Australia). Most importantly, it is consistent with the stance that the UMP, the National United Party and the Melanesian Progressive Party have taken regarding reform and foreign influence since the mid 1990s; it is also popular among many constituents.

### Conclusions and projections

Given the fragmentation of the Vanua'aku Pati and the further erosion of the major parties' electoral support in the snap election of 2004, it is likely that Vanuatu will undergo further political instability in the coming parliamentary term. In an environment of such instability, the formulation of policy will be subjected to further strains as the political manoeuvring in parliament is intensified by the reliance on numerous parties to form government; a situation only intensified by the turn against the major parties.

Historically, the major precipitants of party fragmentation have been leadership challenges within the major parties, prompted by the increasingly highly personalised nature of Vanuatu politics, in which members of parliament vie for factional and, ultimately,



party dominance as a matter of routine. The thwarted ambitions of politicians seeking advancement within party structures have provided the impetus for party splits in the past, and there appear to be few institutional or cultural impediments to this situation continuing.

Electoral results since 1980 imply a shift from issues of national significance driving politics (decolonisation, non-alignment) to issues of more local importance (local development, responsive local representation, access to development funds), exemplified by the increasing support for locally credible, perhaps parochial, candidates whose major platforms are local development above all else. No member of parliament can afford to ignore local demands in favour of the abstract principles of national development and good governance. Unfulfilled promises to constituencies carry with them the threat of electoral defeat. Nonetheless, little consideration is given in regional communities to the relationship between national political instability and support for local independent candidates or those from minor parties. Arguably, it is the focus on local concerns that propels political instability, as the power of the established political parties is eroded by increasing numbers of independents and minor parties in national parliament. The attrition of the major parties implies also their failure to satisfy local demands for reciprocity; local independents and minor local parties are seen to be less prone to the dictates of centralised party executives and are plausibly more responsive to local demands.

There are several paradoxes contained within Vanuatu's contemporary political culture. Larger parties, less receptive to specific local demands, are nonetheless more likely to foster a greater degree of political stability in the national parliament, simply because they can sidestep the politically risky issue of maintaining a simple majority

in parliament by allying themselves with a handful of independents and minor parties, whose principal motivation is simply to join the government. Thus, the major parties will need to mediate their national policies with the specific demands of independent members of parliament. Making up one-half of the parliament, independents will be a continuing source of political instability. The increasingly fragmented nature of the parliament means that developing new policies is secondary to gaining office. Political instability has eroded the pre-independence platforms of the major parties. Political instability led to the implementation of the CRP; support for reform and opposition to it are now the major cleavages that differentiate the parties.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The rebellion, and to a lesser degree the polarised political landscape, was more complex than the Anglophone/Francophone distinction allows for. The Nagriamel Movement, a major supporter of the Santo rebellion, was multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-denominational in composition, its eventual co-optation to French and other agenda notwithstanding.
- <sup>2</sup> Vohor stated: 'If ni-Vanuatu were white skinned like the Samoans or the Cook Islanders, perhaps the Australians would not be reluctant in relaxing the immigration laws to accommodate unskilled labourers to Australia' (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 11 August 2004:2).

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