

## VANUATU

In July 1990, Vanuatu marked the tenth anniversary of independence from France and Britain with a reenactment of the initial raising of the Vanuatu flag in Independence Park, accompanied by the obligatory 21-gun salute, brass band music, and a fly-past of planes from government-owned Vanair.

The twenty-first meeting of the South Pacific Forum was held in Port Vila to coincide with the independence celebrations, and was chaired by Prime Minister Walter Lini. Lini deflected some of the island nations' resentment toward Australia and New Zealand over the Johnston Atoll issue (see review of the region, preceding this article) by observing that, while the two countries naturally belonged in the Forum, they approached some issues with a limited "European perspective." He also attempted to build bridges between Australia and the island nations on the issue of New Caledonia by inviting Prime Minister Hawke to sit on the Forum's ministerial committee to oversee the implementation of the Matignon Accord, but Hawke declined.

Given Vanuatu's continuing support for the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS), its relationship with France is unlikely ever to be exactly companionable. However, the prospect of increased financial and technical aid has encouraged a rapprochement with the former colonial power in recent years. Following Secretary of Foreign Affairs Nike Nike Vurobaravu's official visit to Paris in November 1989, Prime Minister Lini made a brief stopover in Noumea in

March 1990, on his way to independence celebrations in Namibia. In August, Foreign Affairs Minister Donald Kalpokas visited Paris to prepare the way for the reinstatement of a French ambassador to Vanuatu. Ambassador Crespin-Leblond had been expelled in 1987 for allegedly providing election funds to the francophone opposition party. Kalpokas capped his visit with the revelation that Crespin-Leblond had been framed by former Vanua'aku Pati (VP) Secretary-General Barak Sope, now leader of the opposition Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP).

VP initiatives in reestablishing relations with France reflect the further dilution of the old francophone-anglophone schism and the forging of new political alliances among ni-Vanuatu. Late in the year, George Carlo resigned as MPP secretary-general and applied for readmission to the VP, with the intention of contesting the next general election as the VP candidate for Tongoa-Shepherds. Prior to his resignation, Carlo apologized in the party's newsletter, *Freedom and Justice*, which he edited, for the many anti-VP articles it had published. Carlo's about-face followed the decision of former Union of Moderate Parties President Jean-Marie Leye to flout his party's boycott and serve on the VP-controlled Constitutional Review Committee.

The establishment of the Constitutional Review Committee represents the most important political development in Vanuatu during 1990, with the potential to transform both the practice and meaning of politics in the republic. The committee, chaired by

Deputy Speaker Tele Taun, with Leader of the Opposition Vincent Boulekone as vice-chair, comprises twenty members of the ruling Vanua'aku Pati, four Tan Union delegates, and single representatives of the Council of Chiefs, the Christian Council, the National Council of Women, the Youth and Sports Council, charitable organizations, and the two extra-parliamentary opposition parties (with the MPP maintaining its boycott of the committee's work).

Lini's expressed hope was that the committee would radically overhaul what he termed Vanuatu's "foreign, Western Constitution," particularly in the areas of individual rights and freedom, the administration of justice, and the constitutional role of the president (*Pacific Report*, 12 April 1990). For him, the revised constitution should acknowledge that the role of the head of state is essentially ceremonial and perhaps should be open only to "the highest traditional . . . chief or a retired religious leader." Lini also advocated a greater role in the country's eleven local government councils for customary chiefs, church leaders, and women's leaders, believing that the present electoral system "seems to almost isolate the chiefs, the religious leaders and the community leaders." Customary chiefs, according to Lini, should be given power under the Constitution to administer justice in their own villages and islands. Perhaps his most far-reaching proposal is that the redrafted constitution should recognize only those Christian churches that "were there when we were struggling for independence."

For Lini's political opponents, such

as Barak Sope and the MPP, the constitutional review represents further evidence that the VP is set on creating a one-party state. For others, such as Jack Keitadi, curator of the National Museum, the concern is that any further attempts to enshrine "traditional chiefly powers" in the constitution might force customs of only limited applicability (such as the automatic succession of chiefly titles from father to son) on the entire country.

While the Constitutional Review Committee will take heed of such warnings, there can be little doubt that it will recommend fundamental changes to the constitution. The Vanua'aku Pati as a whole is committed to going beyond the inherited Western parliamentary model. Lini also expressed the party's collective view when he argued that independence, if it is to be more than political rhetoric, has to extend right down to the village level. The party is acutely aware that for many young ni-Vanuatu the political achievements of the past decade are less significant than the government's inability to meet their rising material expectations. With their eyes on the 1991 national elections, the party's hope would seem to be that the process of constitutional review will provide a new independence struggle for Vanuatu's disaffected youth to identify with.

The extent to which the review committee's recommendations endorse the prime minister's own reform proposals will reflect the degree to which he controls the Vanua'aku Pati. At the end of the year he seemed better placed than ever before with respect to day-to-day government business. A major reallocation of cabinet positions in Novem-

ber gave him the key portfolios of foreign affairs, energy, fisheries, civil aviation, and tourism, in addition to public service, planning, and immigration. Although this reshuffle was ostensibly to give senior ministers more time for the Constitutional Review Committee, and for the upcoming election campaign, Lini made it clear that it reflected dissatisfaction with the performance of ministers. Some hit back at what were effectively their demotions. Notwithstanding Lini's endorsement of him as his eventual successor, Kalpokas made clear his resentment about losing the foreign affairs portfolio. Education Minister Sethy Reganvanu was one of only two ministers to emerge unscathed from the reshuffle. Despite generally poor relations with the country's teachers, Reganvanu appears to be "untouchable" within the government.

Lini's move against his ministers followed the departure in October of his long-standing secretary, Grace Molisa, after her public opposition to his serving of deportation orders ("green letters") against seven expatriate businessmen in Port Vila. The men were deported ostensibly because they posed a threat to security, but this was interpreted to mean that they had links with Barak Sope. Molisa is reported to have objected in particular to the expulsion of two New Zealanders and the government's refusal, on fairly technical grounds, to allow them to engage a New Zealand lawyer to challenge the expulsion orders. The expulsions became a key topic at the Vanua'aku Pati Congress in October, which had been preceded by reports of a leadership challenge by Grace Molisa's hus-

band, Sela Molisa. He subsequently lost the housing portfolio in the November Cabinet reshuffle.

In the event, there was no direct challenge to Lini, and, given his stated intention to step down as party leader and prime minister by the next elections, it is unlikely that any will be forthcoming. However, key figures in Vanuatu public life were known to be extremely concerned about some of the government's actions during 1990. Religious and women's leaders spoke out strongly against government support for the establishment of the Tusker brewery by the Swedish brewer Pripps, which commenced operations in August. There was also opposition to the government's encouragement of casinos. Newspaper pictures of the prime minister trying his hand at the official opening of the Radisson Palms Resort Casino in July (and before the introduction of any legislative controls over casino operations) did not endear the former Anglican priest to the Vanuatu Christian Council.

The brewery and the casinos promise to be lucrative money-spinners for a government still heavily reliant on foreign aid (though not, as it often points out, for its recurrent expenditures). Three weeks after the brewery opened, Tusker presented the government with the first monthly payment of 4.1 million vatu in excise duty, and Radisson will make over 10 percent of the casino's turnover each month. However, in encouraging this kind of foreign private investment, the government has been accused of creating long-term problems that political and customary leaders will be unable to cope with, no

matter how much power they might be given by the revised constitution.

Similar disquiet was evident with the government's encouragement of Japanese real estate investment in Vanuatu. During 1990 the Japanese development company Narita Golf added Efate's White Sands Country Club to its Bali Hai Tourism Development Plan, which includes Iririki Island Resort, Fisherman's Wharf, and Club Hippique. White Sands will be redeveloped into a world-class eighteen-hole facility, likely to appeal to Japanese

tourists. In July a party of Japanese investors arrived in Vila on a direct flight from Nagoya as guests of the Vanuatu government for the tenth anniversary celebrations. Some ni-Vanuatu feared that the visit might foreshadow further large-scale tourist development and direct access to Vanuatu for Japanese tourists. The fear is that political independence will never be matched by economic independence.

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