The coalition government of Maxim Carlot Korman consolidated its position during 1994, overcoming opposition maneuvering and an extended strike by public servants. It replaced the district councils with six provincial councils and attempted to improve economic management and reduce irresponsible forestry exploitation.

In January the government replaced Vanuatu's long-serving representative to the United Nations, Robert Van Lierop, with Jean Ravo. Van Lierop had established a good reputation, and his replacement appeared to reflect concern over his earlier connections with Anglophone opposition politicians. Around the same time Vanuascope, which had been Vanuatu's only privately owned newspaper, closed down after a year of publication, though apparently from poor profitability rather than political pressure.

On 28 February Jimmy Moli Stephens (also spelt Stevens) died at his home on Espiritu Santo, after a long period of ill health. He had been released from jail in 1991, following his imprisonment for leading an abortive secessionist attempt in Espiritu Santo and nearby islands in 1980.

ELECTING A NEW NATIONAL PRESIDENT TO REPLACE FRED TIMAKATA, FOLLOWING THE COMPLETION OF HIS TERM, WAS A DRAWN-OUT PROCESS. THE OPPOSITION BOYCOTTED THE FIRST POLL ON 14 FEBRUARY. THEY COMPLAINED THAT THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE HAD NOT BEEN GIVEN APPROPRIATE FORMAL NOTIFICATION, AND WERE HOPEFUL THAT BLOCKING THE PROCESS MIGHT OBLIGE THE HOLDING OF EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS. AT A SECOND VOTE ON 16 FEBRUARY, NEITHER CANDIDATE GAINED THE REQUIRED TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY. FINALLY, ON 2 MARCH, JEAN-MARIE LÉYÉ WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT.

The public servants' strike, which had begun on 24 November 1993, continued into April 1994, attracting some support from other employees. The strikers had demanded a 16 percent pay raise, to compensate for the erosion of their salaries by inflation over the preceding five years. Following a court ruling that the strike was
illegal, because the union leaders had failed to pursue negotiations sufficiently before calling it, the Public Service Commission resolved to sack all striking public servants, on the basis that they could reapply for their positions once these were readvertised. After the sacking of about six hundred workers, the strike came to an end.

Father Lini and his National United Party (NUP) pursued cooperation with the other opposition parties during the year, but Lini also kept his options open by discussing the possible return of his party to the governing coalition, in which Korman’s Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) remained the dominant group. Lini and his supporters also criticized NUP members Sethy Regenvanu, Edward Tambisari, and Cecil Sinker. These three members of parliament had remained with the government when the coalition broke down in August 1993, thus enabling the government to retain office. At its congress in May, the National United Party expelled the three men and their political staff. The expelled group formed itself into a new body, the People’s Democratic Party, on 18 May.

Assisted by continuing tensions between and within the various opposition parties, which contributed to their failure to appear credible as an alternative and thus attract defectors from government ranks, Prime Minister Korman comfortably defeated a no-confidence motion on 2 June by 25 votes to 19, with one member of parliament not voting. The proponents of the vote had criticized the government for sacking civil servants in order to break their strike, for breaches of the leadership code, and for poor economic management.

At the fifteenth annual conference of the Union of Moderate Parties, held from 18 to 23 July on Atchin Island off the eastern coast of Malekula, Korman and his colleagues expressed confidence that their party was going from strength to strength and would be able to win government in its own right in the next national elections, which are due by late 1995. But the results of the provincial government elections on 15 November suggested that their confidence may have been excessive.

These elections had become necessary following the implementation of a decentralization bill, passed early in May, which replaced the eleven provincial councils established around the time of independence with six provincial councils. From north to south in the archipelago, the new provinces consisted of Torba (Torres, Banks, and nearby smaller islands), Sanma (Espiritu Santo, Malo, and nearby smaller islands), Penama (Ambae, Maewo, Pentecost, and nearby smaller islands), Malampa (Malekula, Ambrym, Paama, and nearby smaller islands), Shefa (Epi, Shepherds, Efate, and nearby smaller islands), and Tafea (Erromango, Tanna, Anatom, Aniwa, and Futuna). The powers of the new councils would remain limited, but the government envisaged that the fostering of commercial centers in the capital of each province would provide an alternative for young people, checking urban drift to Port Vila.

The elections were held under a newly introduced proportional voting system that gave an advantage to
larger and well-organized political groupings while disadvantaging smaller parties and independents. The three groupings that contested the poll each won control of two of the six new provincial councils. The Union of Moderate Parties gained 19,509 votes overall and won office in Tafea and Sanma. The United Front—a coalition of the Vanua'aku Pati, the Melanesian Progressive Party, the Tan Union, and Nagriamel—gained 19,995 votes and won control of Shefa, the most populous province, and Malampa. For its part, the National United Party, with 11,174 votes overall, won control of Torba and Penama. The minority party in the national governing coalition, Sethy Regenvanu’s People’s Democratic Party, did not take part in the poll. A party press communiqué explained that this nonparticipation had been because the Korman government had failed to gain full cabinet approval for decisions relating to some of the election arrangements. But the main reason for nonparticipation may have been the party’s failure to complete the required formalities within the prescribed time.

During the year the planned establishment of the “Santo Mini-Township and Industrial Park” adjacent to Luganville (Santo Town) on Espiritu Santo sparked controversy. Financed by Taiwanese interests, the project involves the settlement of up to three thousand Taiwanese in the new center. At the foundation-laying ceremony on 17 June, Prime Minister Korman stressed the development opportunities offered by the project, but its opponents claimed that the proposed immigrants would deprive local workers of employment and their presence would have other negative effects on ni-Vanuatu interests.

From the middle of the year Vanuatu’s new president, Jean-Marie Léyé, attracted criticism. In July he pardoned a Taiwanese fishing captain recently sentenced to six years’ jail for illegal fishing in Vanuatu’s exclusive economic zone, and ordered the release of the captain’s impounded vessel. In addition, the prisoners to whom he granted early release to mark Independence Day on 30 July included one criminal with a long record of rape and other violent offenses. The rumor circulated that a five-million-vatu bribe had been paid to secure the release of the Taiwanese captain and his vessel. Father Lini said in parliament that he understood that, with respect to their release, the president had been following government instructions. In November the government took the president to court over the fishing case to establish whether he had acted beyond his constitutional jurisdiction (VW, 26 Nov 1994, 1).

Concern continued during the year over violence against and involving women. A Health Department representative, Louis Nako, told participants in a workshop on women and violence held on Tanna in July that rape was becoming a game or competition played by men on Tanna (VW, 28 July 1994, 9). In September Chief Justice Charles Vaudin d’Imecourt said it appeared that assaults on women in Vanuatu had become almost an accepted fact of life and were a “growing disease” (VW, 24 Sept 1994, 3). Women also engaged in violence, notably in attacks on unfaithful hus-
bands. During the year to August 1994, more than 40 percent of the defendants in violence-related court cases were women (VW, 6 Aug 1994, 5). In November, the Vanuatu National Council of Women claimed that the status of women was very low in Vanuatu compared to other countries (VW, 6 Nov 1994, 5).

Corruption and maladministration also remained a cause for concern. In December 1993 the government had disbanded a commission of inquiry, headed by Clarence Marae, who himself had earlier been subject to corruption charges, which had reported evidence of high-level corruption. Rumors and allegations continued to surface during 1994, but the government was mostly reluctant to pursue them. The government did, however, establish Vanuatu’s first ombudsman on 7 July, in an apparent effort to improve administrative standards and protect citizens’ rights. Madame Marie Noëlle Ferrieux Patterson, a French-born citizen of Vanuatu, was appointed. She has legal and other academic qualifications, and previously had been a partner in a real estate business. More controversially, the government appointed Mr Luke Siba as chief of police on 9 September. He had served as a French police officer before independence, and afterward as a ni-Vanuatu police officer until 1981. But he also, as opposition politicians complained, had served time in prison for dangerous driving in 1979, theft in 1982, and misappropriation of funds and theft in 1983.

During the year the Korman government maintained constructive relations with traditional partners, including France, Australia, and the other Melanesian countries, but also consolidated and diversified Vanuatu’s other international links, notably with Malaysia. In May the prime minister took part in the first world conference on sustainable development in small island countries, in Bridgetown, Barbados. (Ms Hilda Lini, MP, also took part, as a member of an Eminent Person’s Group.) In July, Mr Korman’s government accredited, for the first time, an Israeli ambassador, who will serve on a nonresident basis. The nonresident ambassadors of the United States, Japan, Italy, and Spain also visited during the year.

In July Prime Minister Korman attended the eighth meeting of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, held at Auki in Malaita, Solomon Islands, and endorsed efforts to encourage further cooperation between the Melanesian countries. In August he took part in the South Pacific Forum, held in Brisbane, Australia, and supported initiatives to improve regional and country-level management of fisheries, forests, and other natural resources. On his return from the Forum his government foreshadowed legislation to ban the export of unprocessed timber, in order to oblige foreign timber companies to invest in processing facilities in Vanuatu. The ban is to be phased in gradually, however, and may prove less effective than would at first appear.

Forestry exploitation was a major theme of the prime minister’s visit to Malaysia in early November. Visiting there on his way back from France, he received, according to the Vanuatu Weekly, “an exceptional welcome”
He had several discussions with Prime Minister Mahathir and engaged in other consultations. After visiting the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, Mr Korman said that Vanuatu had sought Malaysia’s technological expertise to assist in Vanuatu’s sustainable development. He welcomed Malaysian investment in forestry and other ventures, but noted that his government’s policy was to preserve 50 percent of the virgin forest on each island (VW, 19 Nov 1994, 5). Some observers were concerned, however, about the record of some Malaysian timber companies. Doubts also arose about Vanuatu’s ability to monitor major logging projects effectively (see VW, 11 June 1994, 1).

Consistent with its membership of the South Pacific Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Vanuatu welcomed the opportunity to deploy members of the Vanuatu Mobile Force in peacekeeping operations in Bougainville in early October. Fifty personnel were sent to join those of Fiji and Tonga in the South Pacific Peacekeeping Force. The deployment received broad support in Vanuatu, and the conduct of the Vanuatu Mobile Force members was well regarded in Bougainville. They proved especially useful as Pidgin–English interpreters in inter-

actions between local people and the Fijians and Tongans.

Copra remained Vanuatu’s most lucrative export crop, despite generally poor prices on the international market. Other exports included timber, beef, cocoa, kava, and coffee. The economy remained sluggish, with hopes for improvement centered on forestry, tourism, and economic restructuring, notably the trimming of the public sector. In November the government foreshadowed a planned reduction during 1995 of 20 percent of public service jobs.

Overall during 1994, the Korman government demonstrated, compared with 1992 and 1993, greater assurance in its handling of Vanuatu’s domestic and external affairs. It remains to be seen whether this serenity will be maintained in the lead-up to the national elections in late 1995.

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