Fiji

Fiji remained firmly under military control through 2010, though internal tensions were to become apparent among the senior command. This was a year of grudging acquiescence under the new order but also of shifts in the defining philosophy of the government of military commander Frank Bainimarama. The December 2006 military coup had initially been depicted as an anticorruption “clean-up” campaign, though the newly established Fiji Independent Commission against Corruption (FICAC) found little evidence of corruption. A year later, the focus had shifted to using electoral reform as a tool for combating communal divisions and to persuading usurped politicians of the necessity of those reforms so as to achieve them in a legal manner, but this faded in prominence after the April 2009 abrogation of the 1997 constitution. By 2010, both the cleansing of corruption and electoral reform were largely off the agenda, and the emphasis was firmly on economic development and the alleged inability of elected politicians to bring this about. All three perspectives had as their common denominator—tailor-made for their different epochs—a justification of military seizure and retention of power.

The year opened with a threat of stiff repression. Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Land Force Commander Brigadier General Pita Driti warned regime opponents to keep a low profile; “otherwise they will be in for something really hard in terms of how we will treat them this year” (FBC, 5 Jan 2010). That threat was never fully tested. The destruction of the old legal order—coupled with the quashing of defiance associated with plans to hold the Methodist annual conference in August 2009—had silenced most prominent regime opponents. The newspapers no longer carried articles by known critics, though most heavily used Internet blogs still escaped the Ministry of Information censors. Formerly dissident lawyers had signed up to the new legal arrangements or had left the country, or else they were lying low. The public-sector unions had been deeply divided and defeated during the mid-2007 strikes and were now unable to meet under repeatedly renewed emergency regulations. The Great Council of Chiefs had been disbanded, and the fourteen Fijian provincial councils were each either deeply split or overtly pro-Bainimarama. Deposed 2000–2006 Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was periodically brought before the courts during the year on charges both of manipulating Fijian Holdings Ltd dividends to his family’s advantage while he was director of the Fiji Development Bank in the early 1990s, and of authorizing illegal use of Native Land Trust Board funds for corporate investment purposes in 2004 (RNZ, 19 Jan 2010; Fiji Sun, 25 Jan 2011). Other prominent critics of the regime were also harassed by the FICAC or, as in the case of Labour
leader Mahendra Chaudhry, charged with alleged breaches of the public emergency regulations.

Commodore Bainimarama cited the urgency of reform as justification for his clampdown. “We’ll need to shut people up,” he told ABC’s *Foreign Correspondent* program, explaining that “those reforms will never happen if we open everything out to every Tom, Dick and Harry to have their say” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Aug 2010). Yet the commodore evidently felt less need by 2010 to elaborate this, and there were no major policy statements throughout the year. Elections remained scheduled for September 2014, but few had much confidence in that commitment. In any case, Bainimarama insisted that none of the established major parties—including Qarase’s Soqo-soqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL), Chaudhry’s Fiji Labour Party (FLP), and the National Federation Party (NFP)—would be allowed to contest (*RNZ*, 2 March 2010). Token efforts to engage those political parties in dialogue had been halted in 2009 just prior to the abrogation of the 1997 constitution, and there were no signs of a reversal in that stance. A National Dialogue Forum—without political party involvement—was scheduled to get underway in February 2010 (*Fiji Times*, 27 Jan 2010), but this never eventuated. Dialogue had proved an irritant for Fiji’s new rulers: it had served to give a platform to their internal critics—those who opposed media censorship, wanted the public emergency regulations removed, and insisted that Bainimarama hold to his promise of eventual elections, but who had nevertheless signed up to the military-led reform project hoping thereby to sway government policy one way or another.

Not only had the main parties been excluded from dialogue, but their organizational bases were also under attack. Dissolution of the municipal councils in early 2009 had demolished a residual presence of the SDL, FLP, and NFP in urban local-level government. The abolition of the Fiji Sugar Corporation’s automatic deduction of union dues in February 2010 was a further blow, both for the FLP’s National Farmers Union (NFU) and for remnants of the NFP’s Fiji Cane Growers Association. The formerly elected Sugar Cane Growers Council, which had been controlled by the NFU before it was disbanded in 2009, was reconstituted as a slimmed-down (eleven-member) government-nominated body (*Fiji Times*, 8 April 2010). NFU General Secretary Mahendra Chaudhry attacked the decision as “iniquitous and injudicious,” partly because the farmers were required to pay for this, and reminded the authorities that “one of the first acts of the military government when it took office in December 2006 was to dismiss the eight government nominees on the Sugar Cane Growers Council as an affront to the democratic process” (Chaudhry 2010). The SDL offices were raided in February after reports of a petition allegedly signed by 600,000 demanding a return to democracy—though this number turned out to be based on claimed party membership rather than actual signatures (*RNZ*, 23 Feb 2010). By midyear, the SDL had run out of money; its website, after only a brief appearance, had vanished; and former spokesman Peceli Kinivuwai was off
harvesting onions in Griffith, Australia. Qarase, by now seventy years old, spent much time over the year in his Mavana village on the remote island of Vatuabula, returning to Suva mainly for periodic court appearances. In vain, the FLP had appealed for “the Commodore not to paint all political parties with the same brush” (FLP, 2 March 2010). Yet by July, Chaudhry too was before the courts, facing money-laundering and tax-evasion charges, based on the exposés of 2008 (see Fraenkel 2009). In October, the Labour leader was again arrested, this time for allegedly holding an illegal National Farmers Union meeting in Rakiraki.

Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum’s declared intention, in early 2010, was for a media decree to replace the public emergency regulations (FijiLive, 8 April 2010). Finalized on 28 June, the decree prohibited foreign ownership of more than 10 percent of media organizations. This threatened the closure of the foreign-owned Fiji Times, which would have put 180 employees out of work. Instead, two weeks ahead of the 28 September deadline, Rupert Murdoch’s News Ltd sold the paper to Mahendra Patel’s Motibhai Group, and long-serving editor and government critic Netani Rika soon departed. Some remaining appeal to the righteousness of the 2006 coup may have helped the FLP website to escape the grip of the Ministry of Information censors, but soon this site too was pulled into line after allegations of “posting media press releases on its website calculated either to undermine government generally or to bring disrepute to particular government officials” (Smith-Johns 2010). Despite the new media decree, the public emergency regulations remained in place.

Control over the media did not exhaust efforts to extinguish the voices of coup opponents. “We will stop pension payments to all those who speak against the Government or all citizens seen to halt Government’s work on moving the country forward,” announced the permanent secretary for Information, Lieutenant-Colonel Neumi Lewi, in January (Fiji Sun, 13 Jan 2010). Sitiveni Rabuka, the 1987 coup leader and 1992–1999 prime minister, had his pension canceled, and his official car was seized while he was out collecting coconuts in Natwe Bay. Payments to other former prime ministers were also halted. In April, it was reported that the retirement benefits of thirty-five SDL leaders had been terminated, including those of former Finance Minister Jone Kubuabola, the brother of serving foreign minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola (RNZ, 20 April 2010). The destruction of the old political order evidently entailed little sympathy for kinship links with the new, though some speculated that a strategy of personal economic ruin might rather be calculated to entice siblings to assume positions in the new regime and thus boost government credibility. There had been few concrete steps in that direction: the one SDL minister who had joined Bainimarama’s cabinet, Jonetani Navakamocea, was sacked in January 2008.

Nevertheless, mid-2010 saw some signs of moderation in the core confrontation generated by the December 2006 takeover, pit-
ting the coup makers against Fijian paramount chiefs, Methodist leaders, and the deposed SDL. By May, the pensions decree had been revoked, and soon other signs emerged that the regime was easing off in response to growing ethnic Fijian acquiescence. Ro Teimumu Kepa, Rewa chief and deposed education minister in Qarase’s government, had been arrested for her readiness to host the Methodist annual conference in August 2009, but proceedings against her were dropped in September 2010. In November, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) threw out charges against thirty-six Methodist ministers for conspiring in the planned insurrection. In theory, the DPP Office was independent. During 2007–2008, it had proved a constant irritant for the coup-spawned government. Yet Director Josaia Naigalevu had resigned after the April 2009 abrogation, and since then the office had been restructured as a tool of military retribution. Withdrawal of those charges was nevertheless sensible: to prosecute a traditional leader, or the churchmen, would only have served to inflame those “undercurrents or resentments” that Peceli Voceca, Fiji’s representative at the United Nation’s Human Rights Council, used to justify continuation of the public emergency regulations when these came under scrutiny in Geneva (ABC, 12 Feb 2010). Yet these were the actions of the victors in Fiji, aware that the security threat had abated, and they did not preclude the continuation of vendettas against arch-opponents: Qarase continued to be denied his pension.

The changed political climate opened scope for the military to consolidate its influence. Behind the scenes, the Methodist church leadership was being steadily reconstructed, prompting 2010’s most popular dissident website, Coup Four Point Five, to accuse the church of “bending over for Bainimarama” (29 March 2010). In January, Bainimarama had demanded the resignations of Methodist Church President Ame Tugaue and the general secretary, the Reverend Tuikilakila Waqairatu, on the grounds that both had been meddling in politics and were closely allied with the deposed Qarase government. A church leader more acceptable to the military, the Reverend Tevita Nawadra, insisted that “the Holy Spirit works in different ways” after he was appointed as “acting” general secretary. He pointed out that no decision could be made on substantive appointments unless, in accordance with church rules, this was done at an annual conference (Fiji TV News, 25 March 2010). The other option was for Tugaue and Waqairatu to stand down voluntarily (FBC, 19 April 2010), but this they refused to do. In December, Bainimarama offered Methodist leaders a truce, including freedom to hold an annual convention in 2011, though only for a day. This was a concession of sorts, but it also opened the path to the church legally removing those associated with ongoing defiance against the new order. Days later, Qarase and the Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi, former church general secretary and SDL senator, spoke from the pulpit at Sunday services at the Centenary Church in Suva, prompting Bainimarama to threaten to again cancel the annual conference. That he did not do so indicated a new preference for exert-
ing behind-the-scenes influence rather than seeking to force change via direct confrontation.

In early 2010, Bainimarama embarked on a public relations tour, visiting the islands of Kadavu and Koro, as well as historically dissident areas like Daku, in Tailevu Province. In Daku, local-level chiefs apologized for forbidding the commander to enter their village in 2007–2008 and embraced the government’s People’s Charter—conveying a symbolic message of acquiescence under the new order rather than any meaningful commitment to its little-known and confusing reform agenda. Bainimarama was by now often welcomed at yaqona ceremonies in Fijian villages as if he were a conquering warrior chief, to be granted ceremonial honors by the iTaukei (people of the land)—as the Fijian Affairs Amendment Decree insisted indigenous Fijians were henceforth to be officially called (Fiji Village, 7 July 2010). On the island of Kadavu, Tui Tavuki Ratu Joni Duikete was in defiance of his paramount chief, Rewa’s Ro Teimumu Kepa, when he expressed support for the government and applauded its local road-building program. In the chiefly village of Ucunivanua in Verata (Tailevu Province), Bainimarama promised to help with the water supply, roads, and seawall protection in recognition of longstanding loyalty (Fiji Sun, 26 Jan 2010). On Koro, amid the Lomaiviti islands, the fourteen villages presented a matanigasau (traditional apology), together with a tabua (whale’s tooth), in contrition for past insults. The Koro Methodist Church’s Maika Ravoka compared Commodore Bainimarama to Moses leading the Israelites to the Promised Land after forty years in the wilderness, while also graciously acknowledging the government’s assistance in building a new copra mill in Nacamaki (Fiji Village, 10 March 2010). Those responses were choreographed for Fiji TV and the newspapers, and then echoed in official government statements back in Suva to indicate growing support for the regime.

Not all of rural indigenous Fiji was as fulsome in its support for the government. Paramount chiefs of Fiji’s three confederacies—Burebasaga, Kubuna, and Tovata (the organizational divisions used in pre-coup Great Council of Chiefs deliberations)—had remained bitterly opposed through 2006–2009, but under their jurisdiction signs of accommodation emerged. Rewa’s Ro Teimumu Kepa remained aloof, but her Burebasaga confederacy—which stretches across the south of Fiji’s main island of Viti Levu and to the nearby southern islands of Beqa and Kadavu—was divided. Not only had chiefs on Kadavu joined the pro-Bainimarama celebrations, but Tui Namosi Ratu Suliano Matanitobua—another former minister in Qarase’s cabinet—was also to ceremonially apologize to the commodore in December 2010. Even within Burebasaga’s power center in the Rewa delta, Ro Teimumu’s vunivalu (warrior chief), Ro Epeli Mataitini, was closely associated with Bainimarama, and other opponents of the Roko Tui Dreketi were not averse to using modern schisms to pursue ancient rivalries.

The Kubuna confederacy—which stretches around the northeastern side of Viti Levu and eastward to the Lomaiviti group of islands but
centers on tiny Bau Island (Tailevu Province)—has lacked an installed paramount chief (vunivalu) since the death of Ratu Sir George Cakobau in 1989. Among the claimants are Ratu George’s children, Ratu Epenisa Cakobau and his half-sister Adi Samanunu Cakobau, but they were closely associated with the Speight coup and were bitter enemies of Commodore Bainimarama (see Fraenkel 2000). Ratu Epenisa had been arrested for punching Bainimarama’s son in a Suva nightclub in 2007. Nevertheless, in May, Bau chiefs Ratu Epenisa and Adi Samanunu watched as their fourth cousin Ratu Tu’uakita Cokanauto presented a tabua to Bainimarama and assured him that “all the chiefs” in the province had agreed to confirm “Tailevu’s allegiance to the government that is leading us today” (Fiji TV, 11 Feb 2010; Fiji Village, 10 Feb 2010). The submission of the Cakobau siblings—and indeed many others—was obvious duplicity: behind the scenes, they still nurtured deep grievances, but this mattered little for the time being. Public displays of contrition from Bau reinforced a constant stream of pro-regime propaganda in the vernacular on the radio stations, and there were several eminent Tailevu citizens willing to take up positions in the new order, such as Provincial Council Chairman Josefa Serulagilagi who became chairman of both the Public Service Commission and the new Fiji Co-operative Dairy Limited. Tailevu’s politics were complicated by the fact that Commodore Bainimarama is from the village of Kuiva, within the province, and because the new president, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, was among the contenders for the Bau Vunivalu title, although the earlier rejection of his nomination as vice president by the Great Council of Chiefs in April 2007 had tarnished his standing within the traditional order.

Fiji’s third confederacy, Tovata, straddles the country’s second largest island of Vanua Levu and, in theory, all the smaller southern islands of the Tongan-influenced Lau group. It centers on Taveuni Island’s Somosomo village, in Cakaudrove Province—the seat of power of Tui Cakau Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, another former minister in Qarase’s cabinet who remained antagonistic toward Bainimarama. Yet schisms were also apparent on Vanua Levu. The Tui Macuata, Ratu Aisea Katonivere, had been among the first of the provincial chiefs to back Bainimarama’s administration, and provincial officials in income-poor Bua Province were soon also attracted by the promise of government development projects. In May, the Cakaudrove Provincial Council at Savusavu prevaricated as to whether or not to endorse the People’s Charter, referring the matter back to the Bose Vanua (district chiefs council) (FBC, 31 May 2010). The Roko Tui Cakaudrove, Ro Aca Mataitini, told the media in October that the province, including its paramount chief, now supported the government (Fiji Village, 20 Oct 2010; Fiji Sun, 20 Oct 2010). On Ratu Naiqama’s Cakaudrove Province website, the Vanua of Cakau contested this, insisting that the Roko Tui Cakaudrove had in fact been denied entry to the meeting (Cakaudrove Province 2010). “Allow the Chiefs of Fiji to come together and discuss the reconciliation plan for the people of Fiji,”
Ratu Naiqama had urged in a speech marking the launch of Crime Free Day at Somosomo in June, which was never reported in the national media (Lalabalavu 2010). The Tui Cakau met with Commodore Bainimarama on 20 December and conveyed to him concerns about the economic downturn in Fiji, the impact of cuts in civil service employment, and the rise in the value-added tax (vat), and he renewed his earlier call for the chiefs to participate in official decision making; “the only way forward for Fiji is to reconvene the Great Council of Chiefs,” he urged, and “the Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau stands ready to assist in this process” (Lalabalavu 2011).

To the south of Ratu Naiqama’s Taveuni Island, many in the scattered Lau Group had seen in Bainimarama’s coup a chance to recapture a national status that had been lost following the death of former president, the Tui Lau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, in 2004. Mara’s youngest son, Lieutenant Colonel Ratu Tevita Ululakeba, the commander of the Third Infantry Regiment, had seized control of the Lau Provincial Council in a mini-coup in 2008. One of Mara’s daughters is married to Fiji’s President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, and another to Defence Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau, the key rival to Ratu Naiqama’s installation as Tui Cakau in 2001. Bainimarama opened the Lau Provincial Council meeting at the Arts Village in Deuba in August, where Turaga Tui Ono Waisea Davuiqalita from Ono-i-Lau Island suggested, “Let’s forget about elections and let’s focus on more and more development” (FBC, 18 Aug 2010). Claims of popular pressure against elections were to become a key plank of the government’s rejection of overseas pressure to bring forward the timing of elections. This was too convenient to be credible: there was something deeply contradictory about claiming popular support while simultaneously upholding as reasonable the government’s fear of elections. As Bainimarama responded under pressure on this point during his August ABC interview, “I don’t trust the people” (Bainimarama 2010a).

Some support for the regime’s initiatives in Cakaudrove, Rewa, Naitasiri, and Ba, as well as other parts of Fiji, was encouraged by consultations over proposals for conservative village bylaws aimed at reinforcing traditional disciplinary measures, but a sense of disorientation in the Fijian community had become palpable. Many found solace in religion or in the hope that ill health or supernatural forces would eventually sweep away Bainimarama and his fellow usurpers. In March, Pastor Laione Lutunacevamaca of the Kuriakos Christian Centre at Nadi Airport circulated a message titled “The Coming Disaster,” prophesying that on 23 June at 2 PM, “earthquakes and waves will hit the entire land from all directions,” generating a “catastrophe that Fiji has never experienced before.” Fiji Rugby Union Board chairman, Viliame Gavoka, a former chief executive officer of the Fiji Visitors Bureau, circulated the prophesy to tourism operators, warning of impending catastrophe. Bainimarama took this seriously enough to respond by accusing “high-profile figures from the SDL office” of trying to “create some instability in our tourism industry” (FBC, 18 June 2010). Overt expressions of rage against the regime were
by now mainly confined to clandestine gatherings or Internet blog sites such as Fiji Democracy Now, Coup Four Point Five, or Matavuvale—but even the web traffic had diminished by late 2010. Anger still flickered in Fijian overseas émigré communities. The Australian-based Fiji Democracy and Freedom Movement (FDFM) organized an almost exclusively ethnic Fijian–attended demonstration in Sydney timed to coincide with the fourth anniversary of the coup in December, but very few attended. A protesting Fijian asylum seeker, Jacob Rauluni, flung himself to his death from the roof of the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney in September. Usaia Waqatairewa of the FDFM reported that Rauluni had phoned him earlier, saying, “I’d rather die than go back to Fiji” (ABC, 21 Sept 2010).

Economically, 2010 proved another bad year for Fiji, following the 2.5 percent decline in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009. Initially, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Reserve Bank of Fiji shared an optimistic projection, with 2 percent GDP growth anticipated over the year, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) expected a contraction of 0.5 percent and only modest growth at 0.5 percent in 2011 (ADB 2010a). The IMF thought that the tourism industry and reconstruction spending following Cyclone Mick in December 2009 and Cyclone Tomas in March 2010 were likely to spur recovery (IMF 2010a), but cyclone-induced spending has never been a strong driver of GDP growth in Fiji. Visitor arrivals reached 619,780 in 2010, a 14.3 percent increase over the 2009 level (FijiLive, 27 Jan 2011), but 2009 had been a bad year globally, as well as across the Pacific Islands, and post-coup discounting of package holidays still subdued tourism earnings, despite the increase in raw numbers. Resort investment had slumped, part of a broader downturn in capital spending. In May, the Fiji National Provident Fund wrote off a staggering F$327 million in bad debts associated with the Natadola and Momi Bay tourism developments (Fiji Times, 6 May 2010). (F$1 was approximately US$0.50.) In other sectors, performance was mixed: Fiji’s fish-processing industry benefited from the closure of the Chicken of the Sea cannery in American Sāmoa; bottled mineral water exports recovered from the slump in the US market in 2009; gold production also improved after a poor year in 2009; but garments remained in the doldrums after shedding a fifth of the industry’s labor force in 2008–2009.

The big black spot was the sugar industry, the mainstay of Fiji’s economy over the previous century and still a large employer. Steep declines in sugar output dated back to the mid-1990s but accelerated sharply after the 2006 coup. Over 2007–2009, sugar exports had fallen by 55.2 percent, and 2010 witnessed another 20.6 percent fall (FBC, 1 Feb 2011). By midyear, the position of the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) was “dire to say the least,” according to Reserve Bank Governor Sada Reddy (FijiLive, 11 June 2010). In September, a loss of F$175.1 million for the year ending 31 May 2010 was announced, well exceeding the F$36.8 million lost in 2009 (Fiji Times, 18 Sept 2010). Difficulties were largely due to the Euro-
pean Union (EU) phasing out of price subsidies to conform with new World Trade Organization rules and to the suspension, in response to the coup, of substantial EU aid for industry restructuring, but these were compounded by a failed mill restructuring program. A F$86 million line of credit from the EXIM Bank of India had been used to upgrade equipment at the four mills, but as Commissioner Western Commander Joeli Cawaki, another military officer, acknowledged, “the new machinery cannot work with the old machinery, resulting in milling problems” (Fiji Sun, 11 March 2010). From June 2009 to April 2010, the Fiji Sugar Corporation had to borrow an additional F$86.9 million, including F$44 million from the Fiji National Provident Fund and, worryingly, F$22.5 million from the Reserve Bank (FBC, 3 May 2010). Both FSC Chief Executive Officer Deo Saran and FSC Board Chairman Gautam Ramwarup resigned in September. Saran’s replacement, John Prasad, declared an intention to shut down Ba’s Rarawai Mill and close uneconomic sections of the rail network that connects Fiji’s four mills to the cane fields. Such bitter medicine was not to the liking of all. In December, the permanent secretary for the sugar industry, Lieutenant Colonel Manasa Vaniqi, announced that Prasad’s contract would not be renewed. Fiji’s economy was, as the Asian Development Bank foresaw, “trapped on a low growth path” (ADB 2010b). Toward the year’s end, both Fiji’s Reserve Bank and the IMF revised downward their initial optimistic projections, and estimated GDP growth at only 0.1 percent for 2010 (RBF 2010; IMF 2010b).

Despite the severity of the 2007–2010 downturn, there were few obvious signs of dramatic collapse in government finances or any failure to meet the civil service wage bill. Revenues were boosted by stringent new measures imposed by the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority (FIRCA), including door-to-door searches for tax evaders and new tax identification numbers required for citizens opening bank accounts, registering vehicles, or securing a driver’s license (FijiLive 27 July 2010, 3 Sept 2010). Foreign-owned businesses protested arbitrary new taxes by decree, or punitive FIRCA interpretations of old rules, such as those that had sunk the Momi Bay development in 2007. The new budget, announced in November 2010, imposed a tax of 15 cents per liter on companies exporting more than 3.5 million liters of bottled water per month. The only company that produced bottled water on that scale was Fiji Water Ltd—a boutique exporter that had enjoyed spectacular growth after showcasing its wares on prime TV shows like Ally McBeal, West Wing, and Friends. Fiji Water responded by shutting down its operations at Yaqara, on northern Viti Levu. Company President John Cochran, speaking from his Los Angeles headquarters, explained that “the country is increasingly unstable, and is becoming a very risky place to invest” (The Age, 30 Nov 2010). Bainimarama was infuriated by these allegations. He accused the company of “transfer pricing” and threatened to put the Yaqara operation up for international tender. The next day, after a meeting with Bainimarama and Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Fiji Water
executives backed down, agreeing to resume operations and to pay the new tax.

This victory was music to the ears of Bainimarama’s left-wing supporters, but other developments left them dismayed. Catholic priest Father Kevin Barr, who had become chair of the Wages Council in 2008, applauded in Bainimarama’s coup a means of tackling poverty and resolving the pressing urban squatter settlement issue (Barr, cited in McGeough 2009). Yet concessions to the left were few and thin. For the second year in a row, new Wages Council orders to raise incomes across nine covered industries were suspended after pressure from employers. Although due to come into force on 1 July 2010, these were only gazetted in October, delayed a further month in response to further pressures, and then put off until at least May 2011 (Barr 2010a; Barr, pers comm, 9 Jan 2011). When the 2011 budget was handed down in November 2010, it contained an increase in VAT from 12.5 percent to 15 percent, prompting Father Barr to condemn this as a “regressive tax” and to blame the “influence of the IMF and the Asian Development Bank” (Barr 2010b). That same 20 percent VAT increase had been proposed in the November 2009 budget by the deposed Qarase government, and its rejection had been a key plank of Bainimarama’s coup-legitimizing reformist claims. Figures derived from the 2008–2009 Household Income and Expenditure Survey suggested that poverty had increased to 45 percent, as compared to the 2007 figure of 32 percent (Fiji Times, 21 April 2010).

Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum preferred the advice of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, not least because—unlike the messages from Canberra or Wellington—it focused on economic rather than political matters. The supranational lending agencies commended government commitment to civil service reform, to a shift toward a more flexible exchange rate, and to changes in the land-leasing system, although they indicated concern about high levels of government indebtedness and the financing of this by the Fiji National Provident Fund (IMF 2010a). Within Fiji, such statements were recycled as indicative of warm international support: “Officials from the World Bank who visited the country last November,” Bainimarama reported to villagers on Kadavu in January, “supported government plans and told him it was best for Fiji” (FBC, 26 Jan 2010). An IMF team, including Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Khan and World Bank Vice President James Adams, visited Fiji in April to discuss a government proposal for a F$500 million standby loan arrangement (Fiji Sun, 25 April 2010). In August, Bainimarama claimed to be close to signing a deal (Bainimarama 2010a). The reason for new borrowing was to refinance a F$300 million loan due in September 2011. In June, Reserve Bank Governor Sada Reddy acknowledged that government was going to have difficulty repaying that bond (FijiLive, 11 June 2010). Nevertheless, talks with the IMF were abandoned in early November, reflecting growing optimism in some circles of government about economic recovery. The November budget set out plans to instead refinance that bond on the private money markets (Sayed-Khai-
In the new year, Standard & Poor’s upgraded its Fiji rating from “stable” to “positive,” based on an assessment of credit worthiness and prospects for the tourism industry, but also on the “assumption that the government will successfully refinance its 2011 external bond” (Fiji Times, 22 Feb 2011; annex to ADB 2010b). In the New Year, the ANZ Bank successfully floated a US$250 million five-year Fiji government bond, although at a 9 percent interest rate. Standard & Poor’s assigned that bond a B-rating in view of the “country’s persistent fiscal and current account deficits, as well as deficiencies in available data” (Standard & Poor’s 2011). The new borrowing added to government debt levels, which even beforehand, had reached 37.7 percent of gross domestic product in 2010, or, by ADB estimates, 91.2 percent including government guaranteed debt (2010b).

After the expulsion of Australian High Commissioner James Batley and acting New Zealand High Commissioner Todd Cleaver in November 2009, relations with Canberra and Wellington were at rock bottom. In January 2010, New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully initiated an effort to mend ties with Fiji, albeit narrowly oriented toward rebuilding consular capacity. His Fiji counterpart, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, agreed to the appointment of new staff members at each respective high commission. Fiji’s interim government provocatively nominated military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni to fill the new Wellington post. Land Force Commander Brigadier-General Pita Driti explained, “We are just testing New Zealand to see how far they can accommodate what we want” (The Australian, 3 Feb 2010). Wellington’s refusal was inevitable, but this was tactfully done out of the media glare. The Fiji authorities sent instead Mere Tora to serve as first secretary in Wellington. Phillip Taula, a New Zealander of Samoan descent, arrived in Suva as New Zealand’s first secretary and also, inevitably, acting head of mission.

The thaw was not to last long. In June, Kubuabola traveled to New Zealand to meet with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Ministerial Contact Group. In the press conference after the meeting, Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said that “things have got worse in Fiji” (PIF 2010b). An enraged Bainimarama responded, “How can the situation in Fiji be worsening when the people in the rural areas actually want a delay in elections?” (FijiLive, 4 June 2010). Bainimarama accused Australia and the Pacific region” and said that “they only invited Ratu Inoke to condemn and belittle him as a way of persuading other Pacific island countries not to come to Fiji for the Melanesian Spearhead Group Plus meeting” (Fiji Sun, 3 June 2010). Kubuabola’s invitation to the Ministerial Contact Group to visit Fiji was promptly canceled (FijiLive, 4 June 2010).

That Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) meeting was scheduled to be held 22–23 July 2010, when Fiji was to take over as MSG chair. Invitations for the meeting, designated as an MSG-plus event, were, in an unusual step, also sent out to non-Melanesian nations. This was diplomatic retaliation for Fiji’s suspension from the
Pacific Island Forum (which, unlike the Melanesian Spearhead Group, includes Australia and New Zealand) and was aimed at undermining the Forum’s claim to be the Pacific’s premier regional organization. Ten days before the scheduled event, the outgoing MSG chair, Vanuatu Prime Minister Edward Natapei, canceled the meeting and refused to hand over the chairmanship to Fiji, citing the MSG’s commitment to “basic fundamental principles and values of democracy and good governance” (ABC Pacific Beat, 13 July 2010). Bainimarama alleged behind-the-scenes Australian interference and, for this, expelled acting Australia High Commissioner Sarah Roberts. Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith acknowledged having “made representations” to Pacific leaders that the MSG-plus meeting was “inappropriate,” but he did not retaliate (Smith 2010). The Fiji High Commission in Canberra was already bereft of its top diplomat; little at this stage was likely to be gained by upping the ante against Bainimarama’s government.

Instead of the MSG summit, Fiji hosted a hastily assembled “Engaging Fiji” meeting (subsequently renamed “Engaging with the Pacific”) at the new Intercontinental Hotel in Natadola, attended by PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, Kiribati President Anote Tong, and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Derek Sikua, among others (Fiji Government 2010). Bainimarama told the assembled Island leaders that it was time to “break the shackles of the past” and diminish reliance on “traditional spheres of influence,” which were “dictated by our colonial past” and “by certain metropolitan powers” (Bainimarama 2010b). The final communiqué “agreed that Fiji’s Strategic Framework for Change is a credible home-grown process for positioning Fiji as a modern nation and to hold true democratic elections” (FijiLive, 24 June 2010). This was a reference to a July 2009 policy statement justifying putting off elections until 2014 (see Fraenkel 2009). As members of the Pacific Islands Forum, Somare, Sikua, and Tong had taken a very different position. Pacific leaders had “unanimously agreed” to the suspension of Fiji from the Forum in May 2009 because of failure to hold elections in an “acceptable time-frame” (PIF 2009). A double standard was obviously being employed as an attempt to reconcile irreconcilable pressures, but by now Fiji’s schisms were being played out across the region: the Samoan prime minister, who was strongly opposed to Bainimarama, was at loggerheads with American Sāmoa’s more supportive Congresswoman Eni Faleomavaega; in Vanuatu, Prime Minister Natapei’s tough stance on Fiji was strongly contested by the opposition. In December, Natapei was ousted in a no-confidence vote. His successor, Sato Kilman, handed over the MSG chairmanship to Fiji in a ceremony held in the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara.

Two weeks after the “Engaging Fiji” summit, Pacific Island leaders gathered in Port Vila for the 41st annual summit of the Pacific Islands Forum, but without Sikua, Somare, or new Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in attendance. (Australasia and Solomon Islands were in the midst of general elections.) “Continuing deep
"concern" was expressed about the situation in Fiji, but no change was made to the pif suspension. The Forum Ministerial Contact Group was, however, asked “to consider possible modalities for engaging Fiji in Pacer Plus negotiations” (pif 2010a, 8), a reference to stalled trade talks on the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations, which had figured so centrally at the pif summit a year earlier in Cairns. That concession aroused little interest in Fiji, where Bainimarama said he wanted to “forget about the Forum, forget about Australia and New Zealand,” and focus instead on links with China (ABC Pacific Beat, 18 Aug 2010).

The call to “look north,” also a feature of Rabuka’s post-1987 coup governments, was a useful drum to beat. Yet the scale of China’s post-coup investment was often exaggerated. Key schemes, such as the Navuso Bridge-building project and an ongoing e-government information technology scheme, had been initiated already in the 1990s (Fiji Daily Post, 20 May 2009; Fiji Government 2004). The post-2006 coup projects were sizable compared to those underway in neighboring Tonga, Sāmoa, or Vanuatu, but not massive. Smaller projects included a F$9 million contract for the China Railway First Company to dredge the Rewa River (Fiji Times, 16 June 2010); F$6.36 million Navua Hospital project co-funded by China and the Fiji government (Fiji Times, 5 Jan 2011); and the Chinese-built F$3.8 million Naqali Bridge, which improved a key access road to highland Naitasiri. The larger projects were the Nadarivatu dam and peri-urban housing schemes. Backed by a US$70 million loan from the state-owned China Development Bank, the Sinohydro Corporation began building a hydroelectric dam at Nadarivatu after the 2006 coup, although it encountered protests from local landowners and trades unions (Dornan 2010). A Chinese EXIM Bank–funded F$70 million soft loan was agreed to in mid-2010 for the construction of low- and medium-cost housing at Tacirua, Raiwaqa, and Raiwai on Suva’s outskirts by the China Railway First Company (Fiji Times, 19 June 2010, 14 Sept 2010). All these schemes were pump-primed by soft loans but entailed contracts exclusively for Chinese firms and heavy usage of Chinese labor and raw materials.

Trade with China grew slightly over 2007–2009, with imports inevitably driven upward by conditions attached to infrastructure projects, but it nevertheless accounted in 2009 for only 1.1 percent of Fiji’s exports and 5.5 percent of imports. By contrast, Australia and New Zealand, taken together, purchased 22.5 percent of Fiji’s exports and accounted for 37.9 percent of Fiji’s imports in that same year (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2010). There was also much hype about potential Asian investment. Schemes involving Chinese engagement in mining manganese in Navosa and bauxite in Bua gained extensive local press coverage, and a huge F$1 billion Malaysian-backed Waila City project was floated in early 2011 but without securing firm commitments. Earlier plans showcased by the Fiji ambassador to China, well-known Fiji businessman Jim Ah Ko, to gain Chinese support to convert Rewa Delta cassava into
ethanol came to nothing. Australians and New Zealanders continued to figure prominently among the locally resident expatriate business community and to dominate the Suva Chamber of Commerce. Organizations such as the Australia-Fiji Business Council pragmatically sought to remain onside with the regime by urging a relaxation of Canberra’s travel bans. Prominent individuals from that organization assumed government appointments. Former council President Bob Lyon, for example, took up a post on the board of Fintel in early 2010 (Fiji Times, 1 Jan 2010) and became chair of the Fiji Development Bank in October (Indian Weekender, 14 Oct 2010).

Bainimarama’s professed indifference to Australia and New Zealand was feigned: the repeated expulsion of heads of mission from Canberra and Wellington was in fact symptomatic of an intense Fiji government focus on the links with those countries—one encouraged by the fact that many permanent secretaries, army officers, and government ministers (including Bainimarama) have families in Australia and New Zealand or have aspirations to get their children educated outside Fiji. Focusing on the perceived injustices of travel bans, particularly where imposed on the family members of soldiers, officers, or ministers, was also a useful way of rallying both supporters and critics of the government against overseas “bullying.” Within the cabinet too, a steely response to foreign pressures served as a unifying tool. The 2006 coup itself was now being justified as a battle against foreign encroachment. Defence Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau told a regional police commissioners’ conference in July that “a degree of external influence has infiltrated our systems, legal instruments and other aspects of governmental infrastructure, weakening our state orders. The rationale of the military takeover was to rectify these problems” (Pacnews, 20 July 2010). This was a strangely xenophobic reaction for a politician who had before the 2006 coup been strongly identified with Western values of “good governance.” It also stretched credulity to believe that Fiji’s new rulers were truly disavowing foreign influences. In November, President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Ganilau’s brother-in-law, was photographed in a Suva betting shop taking a punt on Australia’s Melbourne Cup (FijiLive, 2 Nov 2010).

Bainimarama’s overseas sympathizers also preferred to emphasize the conflict between Fiji and Australia/New Zealand rather than comment on the severe political tensions within the country. In January, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute published a report by Professor Richard Herr of the University of Tasmania titled “Time for a Fresh Approach: Australia and Fiji Relations Post-abrogation” (Herr 2010). This purported to provide sensible strategic advice to Canberra and to warn of the dangers of marginalization as Fiji looked to new links with China and India (see also Herr and Bergin 2010). Its primary message was to urge an accommodation with Bainimarama’s government. Herr’s broad-ranging attack on the “critics” of Bainimarama neglected to acknowledge that many who were deeply dismayed by Fiji’s new direction had nevertheless assumed positions in government, hoping for better
times ahead. Herr had served as a consultant on Fiji’s National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) in 2008, and was an enthusiast for the post-coup reform proposals. He blamed Australia and New Zealand for the collapse of the NCBBF’s People’s Charter for Change, Peace and Progress as well as for the abrogation of the 1997 constitution, and he chastised those “critics” who “continue to deny the need for the charter or that its reforms can justify the government’s prolongation in office” (Herr 2010, 3–4). Those claims were hardly credible. At the start of the charter process in early 2008, most respected public figures within Fiji had rejected Bainimarama’s right to initiate a thorough restructuring of Fiji’s political order. Others—including media council chairman Daryl Tarte, former opposition leader Mick Beddoes, and civil society activist Suliana Siwatibau—initially joined the NCBBF in the hope that it could be encouraged to take a constructive path, involving inclusive consultation with stakeholders, but they soon resigned in protest against the regime’s orchestration and manipulation of the process. It was a ruling by the Court of Appeal that Bainimarama’s government was illegal that precipitated the April 2009 abrogation of the constitution—even if Fiji’s new chief justice, Anthony Gates, had cautiously left it to those appointed from the New South Wales bench to deliver that verdict (see Fraenkel 2009). It was far-fetched to imagine that foreign interference had motivated those principled refusals or resignations from the NCBBF or had driven Bainimarama to destroy the old legal order.

Herr’s fellow Tasmanian was 2007–2009 Australian Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Duncan Kerr, who publicly adhered to the Rudd government line but privately expressed views that were close to those of Richard Herr. In December, as part of the global WikiLeaks rollout of confidential US embassy cables, Kerr was reported, in August 2009, as having said that he favored some accommodation with the Bainimarama government on the grounds that Australia was “close to exhausting its diplomatic options on Fiji to little apparent effect” (The Sunday Age, 19 Dec 2010). Shortly afterward, Duncan Kerr resigned his portfolio, but in November 2010, now no longer a member of Parliament and speaking in a private capacity at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, he publicly urged “strategic re-engagement” with Bainimarama’s government (Kerr 2010). What was “strategic” about this was not made explicit, but implicitly it was to counter growing Chinese influence in Fiji. What exactly was meant by “re-engagement” was also left vague, although Kerr mentioned assistance with land reform, renewed participation in the PACER-Plus trade talks, and even defense cooperation.

In fact, there had been no Australian disengagement through trade sanctions or the severing of aid (Australian aid continued after the 2006 coup, barring aid to the security forces). Nor had diplomatic links been completely severed, despite severe estrangement. Efforts to kick-start local talks or to secure a commitment to a roadmap toward democracy had been continuous since the coup, including attempts by the
pif–Fiji government joint working group, Commonwealth Envoy Sir Paul Reeves, and the UN Department of Political Affairs. The abrogation of the 1997 constitution and the refusal to accept any meaningful local dialogue or to bring forward the election timetable had limited scope for Commonwealth, pif, or Australian engagement. Removing or softening the postcoup travel bans might help diminish frictions, but Kerr’s proposal was for Australia to accept and work toward the September 2014 election date commitment and thus, implicitly, to accept as inevitable four more years of military rule in the hope of some reciprocal concession. The justification was a fear of the alternative: “the longer and more deeply military governance becomes entrenched, the harder it will be for a single person to be able to control the outcomes,” Kerr anticipated, “so there may be some merit in seeing Bainimarama not only as the key to the problems, but also at least in the short-term as one of the few people who can ask the military and demand the military return to barracks” (Kerr 2010). This was close to Richard Herr’s assessment that the promise of elections in 2014 was dependent “on the commitment and personality of the Prime Minister to stay the course” (Herr 2010, 12). Both adhered to the “Bainimarama or the abyss” school of thought, one also popular among those elites within Fiji who feared a Fijian ethno-nationalist backlash.

Was Bainimarama truly a solitary voice urging an eventual return to civilian rule amidst a military leadership committed to long-term dictatorship? Or was he, as Kerr’s fellow Lowy panelist journalist Graham Dobell urged, a South Pacific equivalent of Indonesia’s Suharto, busily constructing a military-led New Order (Dobell 2010). Four years after the 2006 coup, it was still uncertain whether much authority was held by the cabinet or by Fiji’s Military Council. Bainimarama was clearly firmly in control of both, although Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum—who was also minister for justice, anti-corruption, public enterprises, communications, civil aviation, tourism, industry and trade—was instrumental in every key cabinet policy decision. In media interviews, Bainimarama regularly downplayed his own personal role and played up that of the military. Instead of indicating a firm commitment to eventual civilian control, he stressed that “the military is the only entity that can bring about the reforms” (Bainimarama 2010a). He also anticipated some longer-term supervisory political role for the military and saw speedy restoration of civilian government after the 2000 coup as an error. By October 2010, three of the eleven ministers and four of the twenty-one permanent secretaries were army or naval men—though this understates the pervasive influence of military officers across government. All four of the divisional commissioners were military officers, and the district machinery had acquired an enhanced role. Parts of the state had been absorbed under direct military control, including the ports authority, the hydrographic survey unit, and Telecom’s 3dB radio wireless services, and the military was not averse to embarking on Indonesian “dual function”–style commercial ventures
Within the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, salaries had increased substantially, although the largest rises had been delivered by the Qarase government, and increases over 2007–2009 were driven by the provisions of a 2004 Job Evaluation Recommendation. Thus the main venue to reward loyalty was via accelerated promotions or plum jobs in the civil service.

Militarization of the state apparatus had not proved plain sailing. Many serving officers were removed from key positions over 2010, though others were added. In June, Chief Registrar Major Ana Rokomokoti was recalled to barrack. After a poor performance as permanent secretary in the Ministry of Information, loyal Bainimarama ally Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni was moved to the Department of Lands, then sent off to serve as a consular official in China, after which he was briefly sent back to barracks before being appointed as Commissioner Eastern (FijiLive, 11 Nov 2010). After a troubled spell as police commissioner, former naval officer Esala Teleni was pressed to resign in August, but in November became Fiji’s ambassador to China as a consolation prize. Difficulties were also apparent among those who remained back at barracks. In late October, the two most senior officers in the military, Land Force Commander Brigadier General Pita Driti and Lieutenant Colonel Roko Tevita Uluilakeba Mara, commander of the Third Infantry Regiment (3RFI), were sent on “extended leave” and then replaced in their substantive appointments by more junior officers. Feverish speculation broke out on weblogs about an impending countercoup, but nothing happened, though Roko Ului’s kinship links fueled speculation that his brother-in-law, President Nailatikau, might refuse to sign any discharge papers. Journalist Michael Field claimed that both had been sacked for extramarital affairs (Field 2010). Whatever the truth in these claims and counterclaims, there was little evidence to support Duncan Kerr’s image of a cohesive hard-line officer corps being restrained by a pro-civilianization commander.

Nor was the Bainimarama-Suharto parallel convincing. Suharto’s thirty-two years in office is unusual internationally for coup-generated governments, most of which last only a few years. That both men faced down schisms and then defeated rivals within the army could be said of most military coup makers. The Indonesian “dual function” of the army, as both a military and a socioeconomic force, is also a common ambition in the lexicon of coup makers, and anyway it preceded Suharto in Indonesia (Crouch 1978, 24–42). The intriguing aspect of Dobell’s parallel was crystal-ball gazing: it was to imagine that Bainimarama would eventually, like Suharto, successfully entrench a military veto in some legal trapping, engineer a Golkar-style state-backed party and thus consolidate a reasonably stable basis for long-term military rule (Dobell 2010). (Golkar was the ruling party in Indonesia during Suharto’s regime.) Yet this neglected the vast differences between the two settings. Suharto seized power at a time of severe economic and political dislocation—at the height of the Cold War—and used oil exports and
foreign investment to foster “regime-legitimating economic growth” (Liddle 1999, 48; Crouch 1978, 349). Bainimarama’s coup generated an economic crisis, and he had neither oil nor sizable foreign investment to buy social peace.

By late 2010, four years after the coup, few would have ruled out the prospect of long-term military rule in Fiji, though impoverished Burma might offer a more plausible parallel than the oil-rich Indonesia of the 1970s. What conflicted with that prospect was the constantly shifting agenda, the ever-changing personnel, and the sense of drift and continuing disarray and crisis. In November, Defence Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau—Bainimarama’s predecessor as RFMF commander—suddenly resigned while serving as acting prime minister. The catalyst, it was reported, was a refusal to sign a deportation order for Fiji Water executive David Roth, who Bainimarama said from China “had been acting in a manner prejudicial to good governance and public order by interfering in the domestic affairs and governance of Fiji” (The Australian, 22 Nov 2010). Apparently, Roth had been spotted lunching with ex-3RFI commander Roko Uluilakeba Mara, Ganilau’s brother-in-law, and military intelligence smelled in this a conspiracy. And why was Bainimarama in China? He had departed, at short notice, purportedly on a trade mission but without any official entourage. Photos of the commodore sent back from Beijing only reinforced the allegations, on the website Coup Four Point Five, that he was receiving medical treatment (Coup Four Point Five, 23 Nov 2010). Perhaps this was all just wishful website gossip, but there was potentially good reason for concealing ill health since so much now depended on the commodore himself. Perhaps the security threat was imagined, but Bainimarama had become adept at recognizing threats to his leadership and clearly perceived a plot to be nipped in the bud. Whatever the truth, it was obvious that long-term military rule—whether or not Suharto-style—was only one possible outcome. Another was that Bainimarama’s coup would, in the way of the vast majority of military coups, ultimately fail, though more likely as a result of internal schisms and loss of direction rather than popular uprising.

In Fiji, 2010 indeed proved a year of “deafening silence” (Fraenkel 2010), with many steps taken to thoroughly extinguish opposition voices, with no grandiose policy statements from the government, and with much self-silencing by regime opponents who understandably saw isolated resistance as futile. Bainimarama repeatedly urged reform in the abstract, but little was achieved. A few positive steps were made, such as a decree permitting dual nationality and the introduction of more equitable distribution of Native Land Trust Board rents, but the most urgently and zealously pursued reforms (like the media decree) had been all about the destruction of political opponents. Over the course of the year, resignations and sackings flowed thick and fast, involving an acting prime minister, the police commissioner, the 3RFI commander, the RFMF Land Force commander, and key directors on the boards of Fijian Holdings Ltd and
the Fiji Sugar Corporation. Then, in December, Reserve Bank Governor Sada Reddy resigned and migrated after allegations that he had switched private funds to New Zealand ahead of the 2009 devaluation. There were many retreats from the heady ideals of December 2006: the restoration of an unelected sugar council, the delaying of minimum wage increases, and the revival of the deposed government’s VAT increase. Oddly, given the initial multiethnic goals of the coup, the voices of Fiji Indian leaders had been particularly silenced. The coup had become more obviously an ethnic Fijian affair. Young, skilled Fiji Indians continued to migrate, leaving an aging and dispirited Indian community behind. Many highly qualified Fijian professionals also left, but the overall demographic balance was changing—with Fijians reaching 58 percent by 2010 and Fiji Indians down to 36 percent. Efforts to engineer a military-controlled election at some point in the future thus look likely to rely on a primarily indigenous appeal. But elections seemed far away by the year’s end. Fiji’s elections office had been mothballed, and few in authority talked much anymore about voting-system reform.

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**NEW CALEDONIA**

This year will be remembered for what happened in Noumea and nearby towns in the populous, multiethnic Southern Province soon after Bastille Day (1 July), the French national holiday. First, next to the Mwâ Kâ statue on the Baie de la Moselle (which has become a site for annual celebrations of the “common destiny” of the country’s diverse cultural com-
communities), two flags were hoisted up simultaneously: the colonial French tricolor and the flag created in 1984 as the emblem of the revolutionary Republic of Kanaky. That same day, at the Customary Senate in Nouville, the event was repeated, and two days later, the flag of Kanaky was raised alongside the tricolor at the French High Commission in the presence of visiting Prime Minister François Fillon, making the policy of coequal “double legitimacy” of indigenous and immigrant blocs official. Similar ceremonies followed in Dumbea, Mont-Dore, and Païta. For residents who support the Kanak independence movement and recalled the deaths suffered in the violent 1980s, as well as for French loyalists who believe in autonomy and reconciliation, the raising of the Kanak flag in the South was a deeply moving gesture of both closure and hope.

But in the Northern Province, President Paul Néaoutyine of Palika (Parti de Libération Kanak) said it was nothing new, since the Kanak-rulled North (and Islands) provinces had flown both flags together since 1988. Rather than a big step forward, he saw it as a belated act that might actually hinder the creation of a common, single flag, as the 1998 Noumea Accord proposed. The man who suggested the idea of raising both flags in the South, after earlier regarding the Kanak flag as a terrorist symbol, was loyalist Pierre Frogier, president of the Southern Province and a deputy to Paris. He had lobbied French President Nicolas Sarkozy to support the dual emblems, since neither bloc could recognize itself in the other’s flag. He also speculated that once raised, the Kanak flag would never come down, and neither would the tricolor; hence, the country would remain autonomous within, rather than becoming independent from, France (NC, 1 July 2010). Legal scholar Guy Agniel pointed out that former French President Jacques Chirac had given a speech in Noumea under both flags in 2003, and since local loyalists lacked a flag of their own because of their ambivalent identity (one foot in New Caledonia and one in France), the flag of Kanaky would likely become, by default, the only “common flag” (NC, 16 July 2010). Kanak leader Rock Wamytan agreed: “This is no longer a flag of exclusion, it’s a flag that can bring us together... to build a common destiny together” (Macellan 2010b). Yet Palika, and others like President Philippe Gomès of the government executive of New Caledonia, still regarded one flag as the ultimate goal, and even Sarkozy said that flying both flags was “only one stage in a long process that should result in choosing a single flag” (NC, 1 July 2010).

At this point in its political evolution since the Noumea Accord, the country is increasingly self-governing, under the flexible rubric of “autonomy,” so the difference between that status quo and complete independence is gradually narrowing to debates over identity symbols, rhetorical semantics, and specific devolutions of authority from Paris to Noumea. Which of those debates is more important? Some might say the last one, but the other two are equally significant in decolonization, which, as Frantz Fanon once said, “is the veritable creation of new men” (1968, 36). In fact, there is no legal definition of New Caledonia’s
current political status in French law; it is now a sui generis (unique) entity undergoing irreversible emancipation that is leading toward a possible referendum on full sovereignty in 2014 or soon thereafter. At present, a majority of eligible voters would likely not support complete independence. Kanak are a little less than half the population of 245,000, and some of them are loyalists. Those who oppose independence (but still support expanded autonomy) are engaged in two ongoing negotiations, one in the Congress and the other with Paris in regular meetings of the “signers” of the Matignon (1988) and Noumea (1998) peace accords. The former negotiation is among a spectrum of local political leaders, but the latter’s membership is restricted to the French prime minister and leaders of the two main local blocs, the pro-independence FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste), which is linked to the Socialist party, and the loyalist RPCR (Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République), which is led by Frogier and linked to Sarkozy’s metropolitan Gaullist party.

President Philippe Gomès, of Calédonie Ensemble (Caledonia Together, or CE) and other centrist leaders have been able to participate in the signers meetings since their electoral success in 2004—but only to present information and viewpoints if they hold high political office, not to negotiate. This policy is not only empirically illogical because it treats France, indigenous Kanak, and migrant communities as if they are monolithic entities; it is also inconsistent because while the French prime ministers who signed the two peace accords were Socialists on both occasions, Gaullists have begun to command high positions locally. The 2009 provincial elections in New Caledonia, which were based on a restricted electorate of long-term residents, chose a Congress that will have the option under the Noumea Accord of holding a referendum on independence as early as 2014, so that recurring issue was once again prominent this year. In January, referendums were held in the Caribbean French Overseas Departments of French Guyana and Martinique, and both said no to proposals to increase their autonomy (French Guyana by 70 percent and Martinique by 79 percent), partly because supporters had not provided specific details and partly because opponents had played on fears of losing French-financed social services. The “turning off the faucet” syndrome prevailed, and Sarkozy hailed the results as a clear indication that both departments want to remain integrated into the French republic. During a speech in Reunion, in the Indian Ocean, Sarkozy also urged New Caledonians to begin discussions well in advance of 2014 to find a consensual solution to the “post-accord” question (NC, 22 Jan 2010). But in February, Gomès went to Paris to argue that it was premature for the 2010 signers meeting to take up the matter formally because accord-mandated transfers of authority from Paris to Noumea were not yet completed, five-year development aid contracts between France and New Caledonia had to be renewed first, and an ongoing countrywide debate on how to improve the school system should be concluded because New
Caledonia is in the process of taking control over secondary education, and “school must be the crucible of the common destiny” (NC, 4 Feb 2010).

Néaoutyine called increased maneuvering by political actors a “destabilization” of orderly progress toward fulfilling the Noumea Accord’s specified transfers of authority to New Caledonia (NC, 29 April 2010). He traveled to Paris to meet with the Socialist leader of the French Senate, while other signers made comparable trips to meet with French officials. Frogier complained that the latter seemed more interested in talking with independence parties than with loyalists, yet during the signers meeting in June, he and other Gaullists walked out while Gomès spoke. Palika’s rival in the FLNKS coalition, the Union Calédonienne (UC), pushed for a special study of what had or had not been accomplished so far under the Noumea Accord before discussing the “post-accord” era (NC, 12 May 2010). French Overseas Minister Marie-Luce Penchard visited New Caledonia in June to finalize the agenda and assure Néaoutyine that economic “rebalancing” would continue in order to promote “durable development” in the two relatively poorer Kanak-inhabited provinces. Néaoutyine replied, “The [Northern] provincial economic tissue is still young, so [French] accompaniment is vital for its development” (NC, 8 June 2010). In June, the signers committee agreed in Paris that both flags would be raised together for the 2011 Pacific Games in New Caledonia, but that they would continue to seek one flag; that the development contracts would remain at their current level for another five years; that two new commissions would study “post-accord” options, including forms of self-government adopted by other Pacific Island countries; that the transfer of powers would continue as specified in the Noumea Accord; that local hiring would be emphasized, though foreign “specialists” could be used to build both new nickel smelting projects; that the overall plan for mining development would be expanded to include more coordination by processing plants; and that other identity symbols such as the hymn and motto would be formally approved by Congress, while one flag and a country name still needed negotiation (NC, 25 June 2010). By July, Congress passed a law that favors hiring local residents when possible, which the FLNKS sees as crucial to creating a local citizenship, much like limiting voting on important issues to long-term residents (NC, 28 July 2010).

Behind the scenes, the dichotomous blocs of the 1980s have continued to show signs of more complexity, but then France itself is known for such political metamorphoses: in France it is sometimes joked that all you need are two people to have factions and three to have fractures. Among loyalist parties the Gaullists and centrists are the main groupings, but Harold Martin’s centrist Avenir Ensemble (Future Together, or AE), which initially won considerable prominence in the 2004 provincial elections, later broke from Gomès’s CE. Gomès accused Martin of being too close to the Gaullists because Martin and other members belong to Sarkozy’s metropolitan Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), as does Frogier’s RPCR (making that combined acronym RUMP).
Martin’s AE complains that Gomès’s CE is too close to the FLNKS, though the CE’s relations with Palika and the UC vary depending on the issue. Both centrist parties tend to support a liberal socioeconomic agenda, increasing autonomy, and local control over mining and other economic actors, as do FLNKS members. Yet Frogier originated the proposal of coordination among nickel smelting plants to create more dynamic “synergy” among the Doniambo smelter near Noumea—run by long-established SLN (Société le Nickel, owned by the Eramet multinational)—and the two new plants being built at Goro in the South by Vale-Inco (now simply known as Vale) of Brazil and Canada, and at Koniambo in the North by Xstrata of Switzerland (in partnership with a provincially owned mining company that has close ties to Posco in South Korea). For example, Frogier said the costly delay in shipping northern nickel ore to Posco caused by a local land dispute could have easily been avoided if the three companies had coordinated better, and Northern Province mining director Andre Dang agreed (NC, 8 March 2010).

Frogier also warned that the country needed to protect its resources from multinational corporations because New Caledonia has one-fourth of the world’s nickel reserves, and globalization can threaten local environments. In particular, he opposes Eramet-SLN’s desire to build yet a fourth processing plant at Prony and prefers that the three smelters share the mineral prospects there. It was RPCR founder Jacques Lafleur (deceased this year) who first gave Inco a permit to study Prony, which Gomès later gave to the SLN.

Yet Frogier, formerly in favor of free trade, sounded almost center-left now: “For twenty years [some would say 120], the development of nickel has happened in a totally disorderly way, each working separately in the interest of his stockholders and creditors, not that of New Caledonia in the long term” (NC, 23 May 2010). The signers agreed, and Paris sent an expert to explore creating an overall smelting plan to complement the comprehensive mining plan supported by the FLNKS and centrists (NC, 12 Oct 2010). Vale-Inco’s Goro project has had its problems getting under way—from labor, communal, and environmental protests to a sulfuric acid spill in 2009 and the collapse of one of its Israeli-built towers in April—but its director says a thousand tons of ore have finally been partly processed. By 2013, as planned, its furnaces should produce 60,000 tons of smelted nickel and 4,500 tons of cobalt (NC, 12 Sept 2010). In the North, the Koniambo mining and smelting plant project is making similar progress, with the first prefabricated structures arriving from China and 2012 set as the date for production to begin. Unlike the small royalties the South and the country will earn from Goro, the North will ultimately own 51 percent of Koniambo (NC, 6 Sept, 23 Nov 2010).

World nickel prices have revived since the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, and the distribution of nickel profits among the three provinces still favors the North and Islands disproportionately, to promote economic rebalancing (NC, 19 Sept 2010).

New Caledonia has weathered the world recession reasonably well,
The economy grew 2 percent in 2009, despite an initial fall in nickel prices. The economy grew 2 percent in 2009, but is improving; job creation is up nearly 3 percent, and inflation is at 3 percent (NC, 8 June, 25 July 2010). Building the smelters at Goro and especially at Koniambo is creating new jobs because of Asian demand for stainless steel; other large development projects such as tourist resorts are also increasing opportunities for employment; and French state financial transfers have helped prop up consumption by government employees (30 percent of all jobs). Unfortunately, tourism has declined, especially from France, but it has always had difficulty passing about 100,000 visitors a year (only 1 percent of tourism in Oceania). Reasons are not hard to find and include a lack of serious planning, French state subsidies of over two billion US dollars a year that drive up prices, and dependence on nickel for over 90 percent of exports. Government-financed family allowances, for example, increased 22 percent this year, and metropolitan contract workers receive subsidies for air travel to and from France. Less than 3 percent of the population works in commercial agriculture or fishing, compared to two-thirds in service jobs (Macel- lan 2010a; NC, 1 March 2010). The local government has resorted to regulating bank charges and fixing prices on basic commodities such as food staples (NC, 3 March 2010). Nickel gives New Caledonia more to work with economically than French Polynesia or Wallis and Futuna, but budget transfers from Paris have produced some high-level corruption cases (NC, 24 March 2010). Yet the devolution of self-governing powers to Noumea continues, notably in passing “country laws” (with official French approval) controlling mining, external trade, labor relations, primary and (soon) secondary education, telecommunications, and security aboard domestic air and sea transportation. More is to come, such as higher education, civil and commercial law, local citizenship, land reform, and administration of the Kanak Cultural Development Agency. A successful referendum on independence would give the country sovereign powers over the police, courts, defense, currency, and foreign affairs (PIR, 21 Sept 2010).

The Noumea Accord proposed better integration of New Caledonia into its region, so this year the assemblies of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia agreed to work more closely together to gain comparative perspectives on issues and procedures, and they also began to present a united front in the European Union, to which they elect delegates, to improve relations (NC, 26 Feb 2010; PIR, 23 March 2010). France is training New Caledonians to help in its embassies in Oceania, and Gomès expressed a wish to make New Caledonia—rather than the FLNKS alone (since 1991)—a full member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). The MSG sent a mission to New Caledonia in June but expressed concern over the slow rate of progress toward emancipation (PIR, 12 June 2010; NC, 19 Feb 2010). In September, the MSG-originated Melanesian Arts Festival was held in New Caledonia, with a local theme borrowed from the late Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou: “Our identity is ahead of
us” (PIF, 13 Sept 2010). In August, New Caledonia participated in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as an associate member, but PIF leaders told Gomès that more progress was needed under the Noumea Accord before full membership was possible (NC, 6 Aug 2010). Yet the visiting United Nations Decolonization Committee seemed amenable to what Gomès said was “a decolonization that is prepared, accompanied and undertaken, which contrasts with the situations in many former colonies in the world” (NC, 20 May 2010). Despite flnks criticisms of ongoing socioeconomic inequalities and protests outside the meeting hall by Oscar Temaru of Tahiti and other indigenous rights supporters, the committee chair from Saint Lucia in the Caribbean said East Timor is the only country on the UN decolonization list to become a sovereign state in several decades because of economic issues facing small countries. New Caledonia should consider all its options because “decolonization can have several facets such as independence and free association” (NC, 20 May 2010; PIR, 21 May 2010).

The distinction between independence and free association remains the crux of deciding how close the word French “autonomy” can come to “full sovereignty,” which the Noumea Accord offers as a possible outcome. John Connell once suggested that the strong nationalist movement in New Caledonia, unlike in some other Melanesian countries where indigenous diversity is an ongoing challenge, resulted from colonial confrontation with a pro-French immigrant coalition (Connell 1988). Perhaps the obverse is also true: that if decolonization goes far enough, it will create new divisions and alliances among loyalists and Kanak nationalists. The so-called republican pact among French loyalists after the 2009 elections has unraveled as tensions have grown between Gomès’s (CE) centrists and those of Martin (AE), while Frogier’s RUMP seems to have accepted autonomy as the status quo and mutated somewhat to fit what the voters want—namely, more local control over their affairs without completely separating from France. Frogier said the South represents the country’s real “common destiny” because it is multiethnic and accordingly has more challenges to solve, despite its relative prosperity (NC, 26 March 2010). Disagreements over the flag and country name remain, as does some reluctance by the RUMP to support the centrists’ liberal socioeconomic development policies, but both Frogier and Gomès expressed satisfaction over the signers meeting (NC, 18 April, 1 July 2010). Gomès remains president of the executive cabinet, Martin of the Congress, and Frogier of the South, yet the UC sometimes works with RUMP/AE loyalists in opposition to Palika, which can align with Gomès’s CE on specific issues—all of which suggests that the blocs are less monolithic than the signers meetings allow (NC, 4 June 2010). Palika lost provincial assembly seats to the UC and the new union-affiliated Labor Party in 2009, especially in the Islands Province, and despite portrayals of various “personality” conflicts, the real differences are about visions of the future nation. Palika is socialist but willing to work within institutions, while Labor is more radical on both counts, and the UC has a tradi-
of close ties to churches and to traditional custom. Repeated efforts (notably by the Polynesian party in the independence front) to reconcile Palika and the UC within the flinks have resulted only in a vague goal of electing a new coalition president (absent since 2001) sometime next year (NC, 6 Dec 2010). In the meantime, local nation-builders on various sides are beginning to study the forms of self-government that other former colonies in Oceania have adopted, including free association (NC, 21 Oct 2010). Double legitimacy plus common destiny may yet produce dignity for all.

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PAPUA

During the year 2010, the provinces of Papua and West Papua routinely witnessed political events like those of the previous year. Very low level armed encounters between Indonesian military/police and the pro-independence armed group TPN/OPM occurred more frequently than in 2009. As in 2005, several demonstrations over the people’s desire to hand back the Special Autonomy Law of 2001 (popularly called Otsus) to the national government involved not only civil society groups but also state institutions such as the Papua People’s Assembly (MRP). In addition to political pressure from within Papua, growing international pressure was noteworthy, especially from the United States Congress and the Vanuatu government. Pressure on Indonesia increased especially after the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) uploaded to the YouTube website videos of torture committed by soldiers of the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or the Indonesian military). This exposure confirmed to the national and international public that the many allegations of Indonesian security forces committing human rights abuses in Papua were true.

Despite these facts, some positive signs also emerged in 2010. Campaigning and advocacy for more dialogue between Jakarta and Papua made some progress. At the beginning of the year, the Papua Peace Network (PPN) was established under the leadership of Father Neles Tebay and Muridan S Widjojo of the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI) or Indonesian Institute of Sciences. Facilitation and mediation by the PPN and
the LIPI team in Jakarta did encourage the central government to improve its policy in Papua. A Papua Road Map proposal emphasizing peace talks was presented to Indonesian Vice President Boediono and seven government ministers on 23 November 2010; in general, the response was encouraging. The government is now committed to establishing a new body whose main task is to smooth the implementation of the Otsus law. Similar progress also took place on the part of the Papuans. In Papua, the PPN has successfully conducted public consultations in nine districts with grassroots leaders including representatives of the TPN/OPM during February and July 2010. Moreover, the PPN has encouraged various pro-independence factions to overcome their fragmentation and improve cooperation in order to prepare for dialogue. In Port Moresby, the PPN managed to organize a “West Papua Leaders Summit,” which was attended by exiled pro-independence Papuans, including envoys from the armed wing.

In Jakarta, there were some clearly positive political signals. First, the government was more responsive to the report of rights abuses. For example, the release of the torture video resulted in a military court giving a number of Indonesian soldiers jail sentences of five to seven months. Second, the government strove to improve the implementation of the Otsus law and was willing to build political communication with Papuan opposition leaders. Moreover, open-minded and progressive high officials were given more roles in designing the resolution policy. In his state address on 16 August 2010, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono promised constructive political communication with Papuan leaders. This promise was manifested on 1 December by the president’s determination to appoint two special envoys to Papua tasked with building preliminary trust and encouraging clear Papuan representation in the coming dialogue.

As in 2009, the TPN/OPM, led by Goliath Tabuni, continued its campaign on Puncak Jaya. On 27 February a boxcar was shot at from a hill near a bridge over the Kurage River, and a civilian was wounded on his upper cheek. As a consequence, a military/police unit chased the perpetrators. According to a Papuan activist’s report, on 17 March in the village of Kalome, subdistrict of Tingginambut, two local pastoral functionaries of GID (the Evangelical Church of Indonesia) named Kindeman Gire and Pitinus Kogoya were tortured and shot. As they waited for a car coming from Wamena with their goods, they happened to meet TNI soldiers, who suddenly began to torture and interrogate them regarding the whereabouts of confiscated police guns. Kogoya, who managed to flee, heard gunshots. Gire is believed to have been shot, but his body was never found, and local authorities have provided no clarification about the case. On 18 March, TNI soldiers also attacked a compound in Lumbuk village, where they detained and allegedly tortured thirteen inhabitants, all of whom have been identified by name. Again, no reaction or clarification has come from the authorities to date.

On 23 March, shots were exchanged in the vicinity of Wulundan River between TPN/OPM gueril-
las and soldiers of the Yonif 753 unit stationed at Puncak Senyum in Mulia district. Following the shooting, the soldiers swept the area from near Mulia town to the working area of PT Modern Widya Technical. The inhabitants of Mulia were in a panic while the inhabitants of Puncak Senyum and those residing around the Wondenggo-bak church escaped to the forest. During the sweep, a Papuan woman was shot in the knee and then transported to Jayapura. According to Puncak Jaya Police Chief Alex Korwa, none of the civilian inhabitants was victimized.

On 13 April, the TPN/OPM shot to death three employees of PT Modern while they were working in Mulia. A witness, Sony Timbuat, explained that the shooting took place when the employees were riding to the bridge project site in Mewulok village. Their car was stopped and the three passengers were shot dead. Responding to this, on 21 April the district head of Puncak Jaya, Lukas Enembe, said that the TPN/OPM had already created unrest among the inhabitants. He claimed that nonviolent approaches had been made but that these were in vain, and he estimated that TPN/OPM had three hundred guerilla soldiers, twenty-six modern guns (M16, China AK, and SS1), and the support of national and international nongovernmental organizations. The TPN/OPM in Puncak Jaya consisted of three groups under Goliath Tabuni, assisted by Werius Telenggen and Hengky Wonda. At the time, the district head expressed hope that the provincial government and the security forces could end this cycle of violence soon.

On 24 April, one of the TPN/OPM commanders, Telenggen, led an attack during which hundreds of inhabitants of subdistricts of Mewoluk and Tingginambut took refuge in Mulia and the nearest churches. Five schools were burned down. The village head of Puleme village stated, “Now the people are prepared for war.” They formed eight groups in anticipation of another TPN/OPM attack. On 17 May, Telenggen was shot to death by joint security forces in Goburuk village. One gun and many rounds of ammunition were confiscated. Telenggen was one of the important targets who had been responsible for a number of attacks, including the death of the three employees of PT Modern. In revenge, on the evening of 23 May, the TPN/OPM attacked a TNI post at Yambi, seventy-five kilometers from Mulia. A platoon commander second lieutenant was wounded in his hand. Two days later, in the middle of heavy rain, another attack took place during which two TNI soldiers were shot and wounded.

During the year in review, many problems continued in Papua prisons, including poor conditions, lack of adequate staffing, officials being drunk on the job, and lack of discipline. On 15 March, 16 napi (sentenced prisoners) and 2 other detainees, including some serving life sentences, escaped from Apebura Prison. On Saturday, 5 June, an additional 26 detainees and prisoners escaped from Apebura after climbing a six-foot-high wall. On the day of the June escape, the prison held 338 detainees and prisoners; they were being guarded by only three people when there should have been seven on duty. On 5 July, 3 prisoners accused of rape, abuse, and theft escaped from the same prison. Again, only
two guards were on duty when there should have been six.

On 3 December, six prisoners (John Wandik, Urban Mabel, Marnus Togodi, Paro Kosay, John Elopere, and Miron Wetipo) escaped from Apebura Prison and entered a house in the BTN Puskopad Abebura area. While being pursued by joint forces, the escapees fought with jubi (a kind of smaller, shorter spear, used for catching fish) and arrows, according to police. Finally, prisoner Miron Wetipo was shot to death by members of the TNI. As a result of this shooting, Abebura Prison descended into chaos. Prisoners claimed that there was no reason for Wetipo to be killed and that soldiers should have used warning shots instead of lethal force. After dozens of members of the Mobile Brigade (police special operations force) took over the prison, the situation was brought under control.

On 31 May, Papua Police Chief Bekto Suprapto decided to deploy more Mobile Brigade police to Puncak Jaya to try to control the situation. The chief acknowledged difficulties in operating in the area due to challenging geography, low temperatures, and thin oxygen, which made soldiers tire very quickly. The resilience of TPN/OPM and their mastery of the difficult terrain made things worse for the police. Moreover, the TPN/OPM used satellite phones and remained mobile in the jungle, making them very difficult to trace. On 5 June, inhabitants of Puncak Jaya—represented by KontraS (the Commission for “the Disappeared” and Victims of Violence)—complained to a representative of the National Human Rights Commission in Jayapura about the disturbances by the TPN/OPM. They said their lives were in danger and noted that although the disturbances had started in 2004, the government has so far failed to terminate the cycles of violence.

On 15 June, Brigadier Agus Suhendra, who was on patrol at Yambi Mulia, died after he was shot in his head and foot by the TPN/OPM. When troops tried to evacuate Suhendra’s body, they were also attacked. Brigadier Saumileka was wounded on his foot. Puncak Jaya district head Lukas Enembe declared 28 June 2010 as the deadline for a “non-security approach” to the violence; after that, if the TPN/OPM did not surrender, he said he would order the security forces to use all means to eradicate them. In response to this ultimatum, on 31 June the secretary of the TPN/OPM, Commander Anton Tabuni, sent a video clip challenging the Indonesian government to wage war and invited all the people of Papua to fight against the government of Indonesia.

On 21 October, the spokesperson of Papua Customary Council (DAP), Forkorus Yaboisembut, stated that the TNI and the police were responsible for burning down a number of houses and churches in Puncak Jaya between June and October 2010. An arson attack took place in the village of Bigiragi in the subdistrict of Tingginambut on 11 October. Seventeen inhabitants lost their houses and their belongings (including their Bibles), and they had to flee to their relatives’ houses or hide in the jungle. The district police chief of Puncak Jaya, Alex Korwa, denied this allegation. The spokesperson of Commis-
sion A Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Papua (DPRP, the Papuan Provincial Legislature), Ruben Magai, promised to investigate this case, while Agustina Basik-basik, a Papuan who is a member of Indonesia’s Parliament, saw the allegation as TPN/OPM’s scapegoating the authorities in order to justify the continued violence.

While the public remained concerned and highly puzzled by the situation in Puncak Jaya, in October 2010, a video clip showing the torture of Tingginambut Papuans was uploaded to YouTube by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). In the video, what appear to be a number of soldiers with TNI uniforms and guns are seen interrogating highland Papuans, hitting them repeatedly with a helmet. The torture continues with the soldiers using burning wood to force the victims to inform them where the guns were hidden. The video instantly attracted international attention. On 22 October 2010, the coordinating minister, Djoko Suyanto, admitted that the perpetrators were Indonesian military members.

On 1 November, President Yudhoyono stated, “The government of Indonesia will conduct an investigation, not because of pressure but because we have to.” Immediately, the president ordered the coordinating minister Djoko Suyanto, Defence Minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro, and TNI Commander Admiral Agus Yuhartono to conduct an investigation into the case. One day later, the spokesperson of Kodam Trikora/Cenderawasih Papua announced that the TNI headquarters had formed an investigation team consisting of ten officials. As a result of the investigation, five suspects were detained and brought before a military court.

The deputy chairman of Komnas HAM (the Indonesian Human Rights Commission) in Papua, Matius Murib, demanded that the perpetrators be tried in a human rights court. He reasoned, “There is an element of systematic and extended acts: deaths, material costs, and civilian refugees.” A number of rights activists from nongovernmental organizations insisted that according to article 5 of Law 26/2000 regarding the human rights court, an interrogation that is followed by torture is a crime against humanity. Military law did not accommodate torture and excluded monitoring and participation of victims. On 5 November 2010, one of the torture victims shown in the released video, Anggen Pugokiwo, represented by KontraS, testified before the Komnas HAM. In a KontraS video clip of his testimony, Pugokiwo spoke about the torture and how he managed to flee. KontraS underlined that this was only one of many instances of abuse by TNI/police.

The government, however, did not comply with the human rights law, and a military court heard the case very quickly. On 11 November 2010, after only a week, the military judge, Lieutenant Colonel CHK Majid in Jayapura, sentenced the commander to seven months and his subordinates to five months in jail. Komnas HAM commissioner Hesti Armiwulan commented that the sentence did not comply with the people’s sense of justice. According to her, under civilian law, such a torture conviction would have brought at least a one-year sentence. Before the eyes of international com-
munities, Indonesia has been building its own bad image.

The Papua People’s Assembly (Majelis Rakyat Papua, or MRP), as the state representative body for Papuans, has the responsibility to protect and empower indigenous Papuans within the spirit of the Special Autonomy Law. In the run-up to the twenty-six local elections in Papua and West Papua provinces, there were fears that the growing migrant population might have an impact on the outcome of the elections. At least in areas such as Jayapura, Merauke, Nabire, Sorong, and Manokwari, people are also concerned that the growing migrant population might reduce opportunities for Papuans to occupy strategic positions in politics and the economy. Within this context, in November 2009, the MRP issued decree number 14/2009, considered to be “positive discrimination” for indigenous Papuans. The decree declared that all candidates for regent, vice regent, and mayor must be indigenous Papuans. The decree became popular and gained support from diverse Papua civil society groups. While the MRP lobbied in Jakarta on 3 May 2010, the Forum Demokrasi Rakyat Papua Barat (FDRPB, or United Papuan People’s Democracy Forum) put pressure on the provincial government of Papua to produce a bylaw that accommodated the MRP decree by organizing a rally to the governor’s office, although the protestors did not manage to meet the governor. On 17 May, FDRPB again mobilized hundreds of Papuans to meet the governor and demand the same request, but to no avail.

The MRP decree created a legal limbo for some time. After a meeting between the DPRP, the MRP, and the provincial election committee (KPUD), it was agreed to suspend preparations for local elections for sixty days. Meanwhile, the central election committee (KPU), the central government, and the “Papuan representative” agreed to request legal consideration of the decree from the Indonesian Supreme Court. Before the results of the consideration came out, Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi decided to reject the MRP decree and requested that the MRP withdraw it. According to the minister, the decree offended basic principles of the nation-state because it promoted discrimination. This decision angered various Papua civil society groups, but the KPUD decided to continue preparations for local elections under Law No 32/2004 on regional administration.

After two days of “grand consultation” in the MRP building on 9–10 June, the joint session between the MRP and civil society leaders decided to return the Otsus law to the central government. In doing so, they demanded an international dialogue between Jakarta and Papua, a referendum, and then Papuan sovereignty. On 18 June 2010, an estimated 2,500 Papuans were mobilized to march the 12.5 miles from Abepura to the DPRP office in Jayapura. This demonstration, under the leadership of MRP spokespersons Agus Alua and Hana Hikoyabi, was a joint event organized by the FDRPB, the Papua Customary Council (DAP), the Komite Nasional Papua Barat (KNPB, or West Papua National Committee), the Asosiasi Mahasiswa Pegunungan Tengah Papua Se-Indonesia (AMPTPI, or Alliance of Students of the Central Highlands
of Papua), and various other student groups. The objective of the march was to request a special plenary session of the DPRP in order to accommodate the handing back of the Otsus law and follow it up with Jakarta. Three weeks later, on 8–9 July, another demonstration took place at the DPRP building with participants making the same requests. But in the end, the DPRP refused to officially follow up the requests with Jakarta.

In response to the political dynamics in Papua, President Yudhoyono sent three coordinating ministers to Papua on 29–30 September 2010. From the visit, it was expected that a reassessment and recommendation for a new policy would emerge. In Manokwari, the ministers met with the governor and the Parliament of West Papua Province. The deputy spokesperson of the Parliament, Jimmy Idji, stated that judging by the people’s criticism and disappointment in the implementation of the Otsus, the policy had failed. His statement denounced a previous statement by Governor Abraham Ataruri that development in West Papua had been successful. Similar criticism emerged in Papua province. Papua Governor Barnabas “Bas” Suebu complained about problems and obstacles in development. The rector of Cenderawasih University raised the problem of transportation, and the regional police chief reminded the delegation of the poor welfare of indigenous Papuans. Responding to the criticism and suggestions, the coordinating minister of political law and security said that the government was prepared to establish a body tasked with helping implement the Otsus law. Many civil society leaders were disappointed, as the delegation did not give them an opportunity to talk.

The government continued to show its concern over the Papua problem. During the celebration of Indonesia’s Independence on 16 August 2010, President Yudhoyono made a state address in which he clearly mentioned Papua: “In our first ten years we have solved the Aceh conflict and are conducting political reform in Papua. The government has carefully studied political dynamics in Papua and will continue to knit constructive communication for the sake of better development in Papua. We also keep improving sustainable peace building in post-conflict regions.” This is seen as significant, as in the previous year the Papua conflict was not mentioned at all.

Papua and West Papua conducted the Regional Head Elections in nineteen districts (kabupaten) and seven districts/cities (kota). Planning for the local elections occurred following the rejection of the MRP decree and in the middle of a controversy about the Special Autonomy Law (Otsus), which has effectively been rejected by the Papuan people and returned to the central government. In spite of these controversies, and the general assumption that elections in Papua are risky and prone to conflict, the facts proved otherwise. In spite of fears that migrants might dominate, data from local newspapers and Internet sources show that in the twenty-six districts of Papua almost all candidates nominated were Papuans. Additionally, according to several sources, the elections that took place between August and November 2010 were all peaceful.
with no significant conflicts. The fact that local elections went peacefully and resulted in the expected candidates being elected has opened the public’s eyes about how it is possible for democratic practices to take place in Papua. While there were a number of disputes regarding the procedures and results, these were all handled through the appropriate channels and turned over to the Constitutional Court for settlement. This is a good achievement for Papua, despite the ongoing conflict.

During the year, President Yudhoyono visited Papua twice. On 14 October, he visited Wasior, which had suffered from a flood. He met with displaced inhabitants during the two-hour visit—which attracted significant media coverage as the president used a navy ship to get there. The second visit was to Jayapura, where the president attended a nationwide conference of university students on 21 November. He also gave a briefing on regional financial administration before the Papua governor and his subordinates. The Papua Customary Council (DAP) requested a dialogue with Yudhoyono about the handing back of Otsus; the human rights organization KontraS wished that the president would express his concern over human rights; and several others had high expectations for the second visit. As it turned out, however, the visit was more symbolic than substantive.

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It was another year of political drama for Papua New Guinea. The year was dominated by shifts in political allegiances, changes in political camps, swaps in ministerial portfolios, the replacement of two deputy prime ministers, and a constitutional blunder in the reelection of the governor-general. In spite of the political rollercoaster, the Somare government successfully thwarted numerous attempts by the Opposition to remove Sir Michael Somare as prime minister, thus making the government more confident than ever to assert its grip on power until the national elections in 2012. It was also a year of legal battles and protests on controversial constitutional amendments and environmental issues. The concerned public, landowner groups, and nongovernmental organizations have become a fortified mouthpiece of the people on issues of human rights, equality, environment, and the constitutionality of amendments to laws that seem to favor politicians and multinational companies over people’s rights. Unlike in previous years, these interest groups showed the government and resource companies that they are a force to be reckoned with concerning the legality of laws and decisions made by the government that have the potential to affect the welfare of communities.

The event that galvanized the nation in the early part of the year was the prison “walkout” of the country’s most-wanted bank robber, William Kapris, on 12 January from the maximum-security unit of the country’s top prison, Bomana, outside of Port Moresby. Kapris was involved in a string of million-kina bank robberies in the Gulf and Madang provinces. (One kina equals approximately U$0.39.) He was released by a woman pretending to be a human rights lawyer who entered the maxi-
mum-security unit. He was recaptured on 5 February in a Port Moresby guesthouse and claimed in a police video interrogation to have close ties to certain politicians and the Asian triad in the country. He also claimed to have links to Minister for Treasury and Finance Patrick Pruaitch, Minister for Correctional Service Tony Aimo, and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Francis Marus, all of whom are from the same province as Kapris.

With these insinuations, the prisoner received high-level visits to his prison cell from the police commissioner and the then minister for justice and attorney general, Dr Allan Marat. It was alleged that Kapris was the most expensive prisoner, due to the costs involved in capturing him as well as the security provided to prevent any further escape attempts. His escape led to the suspensions of Correctional Service Commissioner Richard Sikani and Minister Aimo. Both the commissioner and the minister were later reinstated after investigations cleared them of all allegations.

Frequent jailbreaks have become an increasing public-safety concern and questions have been raised as to the capacity of the Correctional Service to manage the country’s prison system. In what was seen as a startling response to the situation, Minister Aimo announced his decision to use K9 million to buy guns for the Correctional Service. The announcement was immediately condemned by Transparency International PNG (TIPNG), which argued that the community must be satisfied that this expenditure will result in improvements in the performance of the Correctional Service (Post Courier, 8 Oct 2010). Earlier in August, Minister Aimo was considering the option of recruiting an expatriate to head the Correctional Service, as Commissioner Sikani’s contract was expiring. This proposition also received criticism from the president of the Public Employees Association, Michael Malabag (Post Courier, 12 Aug 2010).

At the end of February, outspoken National Capital District (NCD) Governor Powes Parkop launched his new political party, the Social Democratic Party. About 1,000 people registered with K100 each as foundational members. Parkop had run for election in 2007 as an independent candidate with no political party affiliation.

The Maladina Bill, introduced in May 2009 by Esa’ala MP Moses Maladina for a constitutional amendment to remove the powers of the Ombudsman Commission, remains one of the most controversial constitutional amendments, attracting protests from wide segments of the community. Despite the outbursts, on the second reading of the bill on 9 March, Parliament voted 83 to 0 to amend section 27(4) of the PNG Constitution. The passing of the amendment will effectively disallow the Ombudsman Commission from issuing directives to prevent payment from public funds to officeholders if it feels there are improprieties.

TIPNG and concerned individuals and organizations have gone on the campaign trail to try and stop Parliament from voting for the amendment on the third and final reading. They say the changes will take away the watchdog’s ability to stop politicians and public officeholders from wasting public money and make it even harder
to investigate leaders suspected of misconduct in office. On 4 May, through the Community Coalition Against Corruption (CCAC), delivered a petition to Parliament on these proposed changes, urging politicians to vote against the Maladina amendment. The government decided to defer the final reading and to give the Parliamentary Committee on the Ombudsman Commission time to raise awareness. This was decided after protest marches were held in Port Moresby and Lae. However, Prime Minister Somare lashed out at the Ombudsman Commission, nongovernmental organizations, civil society groups, and the media for leading the public to believe that the Parliament intends to override the constitution and remove powers of the Ombudsman Commission. Somare said that the amendments will not in any way remove the powers of the Ombudsman Commission but rather will define the commission’s responsibilities. The bill has yet to go through its third and final reading.

Hostility toward people of Sepik origin in the township of Bulolo in Morobe Province in May left about 4,000 people homeless and without food and other basic needs. The Sepiks, whose forebears initially migrated to Bulolo in the 1950s to work at one of the first gold mines in Papua New Guinea, are now third- and fourth-generation residents of the area. The conflict has resulted in a humanitarian crisis with serious threats to the health, security, and well-being of the people. More than 400 Sepiks employed in the Bulolo bank, post office, schools, and the nearby mine resigned en masse in fear of their lives. There were also concerns about essential businesses closing down as Sepiks were forced to leave. People from other provinces and those married to Sepiks were also caught in the crossfire of the unrest.

To resolve the ethnic conflict, the government is planning to resettle some Sepiks in other parts of Morobe Province, some in other provinces, and others in East Sepik Province. To date, the government has not yet started the process of relocation, and concerns are increasing for the safety of these people. There are growing concerns, particularly from nongovernmental organizations and international organizations providing humanitarian aid, that the relocation of Sepiks is a forced resettlement and against their basic human rights. Most of these people are no longer from Sepik and are descendants of intermarriages with locals and people from other provinces residing in the area.

Court cases on election petitions seem to have persisted, while the date for the next national elections is less than two years away. In April, the Supreme Court declared Tom Olga as the duly elected member of the Western Highlands regional seat after a relentless court battle over the seat with former Prime Minister Paias Wingti. Mr Olga appeared to be the winner after scoring the highest number of votes on three occasions: after the 2007 national general elections, after the first recount ordered by the National Court, and after the further recount ordered by the Supreme Court. The
court decision resolves the question about who will represent Western Highlands Province in Parliament and finally puts to rest the tussle for the seat of governor, as provincial members of Parliament also serve as governors for their respective provinces.

In June, the member for Wewak, National Alliance candidate Jim Simatab, was ousted from Parliament by petitioner Dr Moses Manwau following a successful review in the Supreme Court. Manwau filed a petition against Simatab’s election and the Electoral Commission for counting votes from a disputed ballot box, because the box’s inner and outer seals had been damaged. This concern was raised with the East Sepik Election Steering Committee, which recommended these ballots not be counted. The committee also decided that the then returning officer Martin Maingu should be removed. However, Maingu went ahead with the counting of votes from the disputed ballot box (Post Courier, 25 June 2010). Manwau was declared as the new member for Wewak open electorate when the disputed ballot box was excluded from the counting.

It is widely recognized that PNG elections are difficult to manage given the problems of violence, election administration, and inflated electoral rolls, to name a few. These problems have compelled the Electoral Commission to consider the possibility of introducing electronic voting in future elections. As for the next national election in 2012, the electoral roll will be the highest priority of the Electoral Commission. A report published by the National Research Institute argues that to minimize these problems there need to be resources and political support in place, a dedicated roll-management unit, and, in the long term, a national identification card system that would also facilitate voting and significantly reduce electoral fraud. The Electoral Commission was also cautioned about too quickly adopting electronic voting solutions in a country with a vast geographical landscape that can test the durability of electronic equipment (Ladley, Holtved, and Kantha 2010).

On 24 September, Electoral Commissioner Andrew Trawen in the closing of an election managers’ workshop stated that it will cost the State a total of K230 million to update the electoral roll before the 2012 national elections. The sharp increase from K127 million in 2007 was necessary due to the increase in population, and specifically the number of people who will turn eighteen before 2012 (Post Courier, 27 Sept 2010).

Toward the end of May, the Environmental Act Amendment Bill was seemingly rushed through Parliament in what was seen as a rarely adopted procedure. The government, using its majority, waived the twenty-one-day requirement for circulation of amendment bills to members and pushed the amendment through. The 73 to 0 vote effectively outlawed third-party lawsuits against resource projects in Papua New Guinea (The National, 31 May 2010). Outspoken NCD Governor Powes Parkop criticized the bill, saying that the new amendments allowed investors to bypass due process and obtain from the director, who is the secretary of the Department of Environment and Conservation, a certificate that is absolute proof of
compliance with all environmental laws, processes, and standards. This in effect vests absolute power in one person, a big concern because the law also attempts to remove the court’s authority to review the exercise of such power (Post Courier, 3 June 2010).

The amendment to the Environmental Act presented to Parliament received widespread condemnation, particularly from landowners. Community leaders want the government to withdraw the bill, which they think will bar resource owners from taking environmental issues to court. Community leaders fear that the bill will trigger civil unrest if resource owners cannot hold companies liable for environmental damage, and they cited examples from other mines such as Misima, Ok Tedi, and Bougainville Copper Mine (Post Courier, 11 June 2010).

The justifications for the legislation and the way it was bulldozed through Parliament also led Sumkar MP Ken Fairweather, a member of the People’s National Congress party, to withdraw his support for the government, saying that he did not like the changes to the environmental law because they would take away the rights of the people to seek justice over the use of their land. According to Fairweather, under the bill the director’s decision on environmental permits and related issues is final and cannot be reviewed or challenged in any court or tribunal (The National, 22 June 2010). Environment and Conservation Minister Benny Allen declared in Parliament on June 23 that, for the sake of “national interest,” the government is not going to repeal the amendment. He mentioned that the government stance is that any legitimate grievances or redress should be sought through a Supreme Court interpretation of the new laws and not through a repeal of the law in Parliament (Post Courier, 24 June 2010).

In another contentious environmental case, the court in Madang Province ruled that the work on the Ramu Nickel Mine’s deep-sea tailings disposal system had to be stopped. The court ruled in favor of a group of landowners and refused injunction applications from developer Chinese Metallurgical Corporation Group (mcc) and the Mineral Resources Authority. The developer could construct the system on land but would not be allowed to disturb the offshore environment in any way.

The landowners’ main intention is to permanently stop the state and mcc from going ahead with preliminary preparations at the mine without having in place, and having available to all parties concerned, a reliable environmental impact assessment report. The landowners claimed that the environmental permit that was issued by the Department of Environment and Conservation was granted under the repealed Environmental Planning Act. They claimed that even the State relied on an environmental impact assessment report done by mcc to issue the permit, when it should have engaged an independent body to do the report. The landowners wanted mcc to fund an independent environmental impact assessment of the deep-sea tailings placement system. They wanted all defendants to provide environmental plans and approvals and related documents concerning the
Ramu Nickel project (*The National*, 19 April 2010). A landowner group aligned with the MCC claimed that lawyer Tiffany Nonggorr and the four landowners she represents were attempting to impede development from taking place and benefiting the people. They demanded that Nonggorr provide alternative development initiatives to the people of the affected area. Once the previously mentioned amendments were passed, the Ramu Nickel mine in Madang was assured of the ability to operate without threat of lawsuit.

In early May, Minister for Justice and Attorney General Dr Allan Marat was bluntly told by Prime Minister Somare to leave the government caucus meeting in Parliament and resign as minister. This resulted from public statements made by Marat to the media that landowners would only get crumbs from the liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, and also from comments made against the Ramu Nickel mine project and the controversial Maladina Bill. After his sacking, Marat and his Melanesian Liberal Party were immediately invited by Bart Philemon to join the Opposition, of which Philemon is deputy leader (*The National*, 5 May 2010). The member for Rigo, Ano Pala, was appointed to replace Marat as attorney general. Pala was himself replaced in December by former Chief Justice and Madang Governor Sir Arnold Amet, just before Somare was referred to the leadership tribunal. Pala was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture.

It was reported that the government in June revived the National Anti-Corruption Alliance (NACA) to investigate corruption in government departments. The NACA was established in 2004 with the board comprising chief executive officers or heads of key government departments. It was reported that with the resurrection of the board, other major allegations involving corruption would be scrutinized by the body and investigations would be carried out with prosecutions (*Post Courier*, 22 June 2010).

Meanwhile, as with previous reports, the 800-page report of the Commission of Inquiry presented to Somare in November 2009, which looked into financial mismanagement and corruption at the Department of Finance and implicated prominent government officials and members of Parliament, seemed forgotten (see Kantha 2010, 456). Two prominent lawyers, Paul Paraka and former Solicitor General Zachary Gelu, who were adversely referred to in the final report, also took out a court injunction gagging the media from publishing anything about the final report (*Post Courier*, 8 March 2010).

The cabinet in June endorsed a review of existing laws relevant to prostitution and unnatural sex offences to be undertaken by the Constitutional and Law Reform Commission (CLRC). The National Executive Council (NEC) on 1 June noted the content of a policy submission by Minister for Community Development Dame Carol Kidu, and instructed the attorney general and minister for justice to refer the criminal laws and other relevant matters to the CLRC for review. Dame Kidu’s submission sought NEC approval to strengthen Papua New Guinea’s response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and simultaneously proposed a review of criminal laws.
on sex work and consensual male-to-male sex from the perspective of social and public health implications (Post Courier, 25 Oct 2010). As anticipated, Dame Kidu did not receive the backing of the community and women’s groups but rather criticism on the changes to sex laws. These groups argued that Papua New Guinea has a strong traditional Melanesian culture and is founded on Christian principles and that the review would promote unethical sexual practices such as homosexuality and prostitution rather than counter the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Also in June, by an overwhelming majority, the people of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville elected as their new president John Momis, a former Catholic priest, national politician, and ambassador. Momis replaced incumbent James Tanis. After being declared the winner of the presidential election, Momis mentioned that he will work toward completing the arms-disposal program in the autonomous region and will look at other ways of generating revenue to finance much-needed public services and infrastructure (The National, 9 June 2010).

The government’s failure to honor commitments under the 1995 memorandum of agreement with Lihir Gold Mine has compelled the New Ireland Government to consider options for autonomy. Former Prime Minister and New Ireland Governor Sir Julius Chan shared the sentiment with provincial leaders that under the current and previous governments the province has not improved, in spite of fifteen years of Lihir Gold mining and three years of Simberi mining projects, which were supposed to result in some US$157 million in entitlements for the province and landowners. He argued that the province must gain the same form of autonomy as Bougainville since the national government cannot be trusted and bureaucracy is not disciplined (Pacific Islands Report, 23 March 2010).

The acting chief secretary to the government, Manasupe Zurenuoc, announced in June that East New Britain Province would be the first province to gain autonomy under the National Power Sharing and National Framework Policy. The policy is being finalized and will be tabled in Parliament. Under the autonomy proposals by East New Britain and New Ireland, both provinces will gain increased functions and responsibilities for service delivery. The national government will help provincial governments to identify these responsibilities by creating a list of joint functions before negotiating through its departments which functions are to be transferred to provincial governments (The National, 16 June 2010).

In July, the Supreme Court ruled that certain sections of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) were null and void. The court decision enabled votes of no confidence to be introduced in Parliament if a majority of the parties decide to vote against the prime minister (Post Courier, 8 July 2010). The ruling was on five central issues relating to members’ democratic rights or choices (1) to resign from their political parties; (2) to vote for a prime minister; (3) to remove a prime minister in a vote of no confidence; (4) to vote on a national budget; and (5) to vote to enact or repeal a constitutional law
The ruling was welcome news for the Opposition, who were anxious to oust Somare, and they wasted no time in instituting votes on no-confidence motions in the parliamentary sittings that followed.

There were also concerns that the Supreme Court decision might decrease political stability, which is necessary for economic growth. The Registrar of the Office of the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission warned of instability due to certain sections of the OLIPPAC being thrown out by the court. He added that nobody wanted to go back to the experience from 1975 to 1999 where frequent changes of government were a nightmare that led to the adoption of OLIPPAC in 2001. While welcoming the ruling, Somare warned that the effect of this decision could send the country back to the days when political parties focused on staying in office rather than on promoting development (Post Courier, 8 July 2010).

A National Research Institute report published in September succinctly summarizes the problems caused by frequent votes of no confidence prior to the implementation of the OLIPPAC. For instance, the no-confidence votes have reduced the average lifespan of governments to two-and-a-half years and affected the ability of governments to concentrate on the delivery of services. The adjournment of Parliament to avoid votes of no confidence has also been a common practice (Gelu 2010, 157). This tactic, along with the Speaker of Parliament refusing to entertain motions of no confidence from the Opposition against the prime minister, have infuriated the Opposition and certain segments of the society, who have labeled the practice tantamount to dictatorship.

Business houses in Papua New Guinea also expressed their fear of a change in government that might derail achievements in the economy made in the last eight years. President of the PNG Chamber of Commerce and Industry John Leahy expressed that they were not concerned about who became prime minister, as long as the positive gains that the country made over the years were not slowed down (Post Courier, 12 July 2010).

Despite the setback they faced in November 2009 when a bill reserving seats for women representatives in Parliament failed to pass (see Kantha 2010), women mobilized and pushed their local members to reintroduce the motion in Parliament’s July sitting. The bill was revised to require twenty-two reserved seats for women, contrasted with the three seats called for in the initial bill. Women leaders from the provinces flocked in numbers to Port Moresby to show their solidarity for the bill championed by Minister for Community Development Dame Carol Kidu. When Parliament met in July, the women were again upset that the bill did not get a mention, and Parliament was adjourned until May 2011. The women, led by Dame Kidu, accused members of Parliament and Prime Minister Somare for not doing enough to influence other members to support the bill. The more distraught women vowed to campaign against their representatives in the next election.

The Ministry of Finance and
Treasury was taken over by MP Peter O’Neil when Patrick Pruaitch was suspended from office in a Supreme Court ruling. The ruling was in relation to an appeal by Pruaitch against his referral to a leadership tribunal by the Ombudsman Commission in July 2009 over allegations of misconduct in office.

The health sector also had its share of controversy. The proposal of the government to build a “super hospital” known as the Pacific Medical Centre (PMC) outside of Port Moresby to cater especially to foreigners in the LNG project generated mixed reactions from the public, health practitioners, and doctors alike. Concerns were raised over the government’s diverting the health budget to a project that will only benefit foreigners and the few locals who can afford the services. Given the dire situation faced by hospitals and health centers throughout the country, there were also concerns regarding the diversion to the medical center of health funds budgeted for priority areas.

The fears of the public came true when it was reported on 1 September that money earmarked for the much-needed work at the provincial hospitals was being diverted to the new super hospital. According to National Executive Council (NEC) documents, the funds were to redevelop three key infrastructure items: medical and static plant equipment and priority health institutional housing. The NEC submission from the Health Minister Sasa Zibe showed that K230.4 million of the K800 million in Chinese grants to support public hospital infrastructure, equipment, and staff housing was diverted to fund the construction of the Pacific Medical Centre. The submission, according to the documents, had been made by Minister Zibe on 23 June at the direction of the prime minister and it did not include the medical center.

However, when the submission went to the cabinet, the NEC decided to divert the funds earmarked for medical equipment replacement (K81,645,500), static plant equipment replacement (K17,430,000), and the health nationwide institutional housing development project (K124,900,000). According to the time frame, the PMC development funding is scheduled for 2011–2013 (Post Courier, 1 Sept 2010). National Planning Minister Paul Tiensten said the government was ready to go into a private-public partnership arrangement to see the state-of-the-art facility built in the region. He confirmed that companies like ExxonMobil and Oil Search wanted the facility to cater to its workers in the country instead of flying them to Australia (The National, 22 Sept 2010).

The Trafficking in Persons Report, published by the US Department of State in June 2010, states that Papua New Guinea is a source, destination, and transit country for people subjected to human trafficking, specifically forced prostitution and labor. The report rates Papua New Guinea as a Tier 3 country whose government is not doing much to deal with the issue. In September, the Department of Justice and Attorney General worked in partnership with the International Organization for Migration to present a bill on people smuggling and human trafficking in a workshop in Port Moresby. These offenses will now
be included in an amendment to the criminal code (The National, 4 Oct 2010).

Since Papua New Guinea’s inclusion in the Pacific Seasonal Workers Scheme in 2008, there were no concrete developments until October 2010 when the government allocated K5.8 million to fund the scheme. Then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Trade and Immigration Sam Abal announced that the NEC had approved the memorandum of understanding and the facilitation agreements between Papua New Guinea and Australia to pave the way for the scheme to kick off. The government had approved the funding from previous savings as well as the 2011 budget appropriations to manage the program. Abal added that the scheme would foster goodwill and further strengthen the bilateral ties between Papua New Guinea and Australia, including people-to-people relations (Post Courier, 15 Oct 2010).

In a shocking revelation in November, Noel Anjo, activist and chairman of the Civil Society Coalition Partners who was instrumental in the anti-Asian riot in 2009 (see Kantha 2010, 452–453), alleged that Somare had ordered him kidnapped and brought to Somare’s residence where the prime minister and his wife, Lady Veronica, had assaulted him. Anjo also joined the Opposition members of Parliament in a press conference where he revealed that the kidnapping allegedly took place on 16 February 2009. The government immediately accused the Opposition of trying to destabilize the government and asked the Ombudsman Commission to investigate the conduct of Anjo as an activist (Post Courier, 15 Nov 2010).

Belden Namah, the leader of the PNG Party and member for Vanimo-Green, vowed to support Anjo with a legal team for his case. However, the accusations against Somare did not proceed far and never resulted in any formal charges against Somare and Lady Veronica. Anjo’s accusations were reported to police more than a year after the alleged incident and were seen as opportunistic in collusion with the Opposition to bring down Somare.

In a dramatic turn of events in December, Somare temporarily stepped aside from his political post, several hours after Acting Public Prosecutor Jimmy Wala Tamate asked Chief Justice Sir Salamo Injia to appoint a tribunal to investigate allegations that the prime minister had failed to file his annual returns and had filed them late or incompletely on numerous occasions since 1994 (see Kantha 2009, 365). This will be the first time in the history of the country that a prime minister is referred for allegations of misconduct in office.

While announcing that he was stepping aside, Somare appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs, Trade and Immigration Sam Abal as acting prime minister instead of Deputy Prime Minister Don Polye. The Opposition immediately criticized Somare for overlooking Polye, who was the third person to hold the deputy prime minister’s post in 2010. Acting Prime Minister Abal took over the reins and assured businesses and the people of Papua New Guinea that the government was intact and all policies and programs developed over the last eight years would be implemented. Somare returned after four weeks of “holiday” to take
the helm from Acting Prime Minister Abal after a delay in the appointment of a tribunal.

The police force was also beset with problems and faced an allegiance crisis when Police Commissioner Gari Baki was suspended by the government for allegedly misleading the NEC in requesting k10 million for operations at the LNG project sites. Baki’s longtime rival Anthony Wagambie, who was suspended earlier by Baki for alleged misconduct, was appointed acting police commissioner. Wagambie immediately made changes to the key positions within the police hierarchy, including appointing NCD Metropolitan Superintendent Fred Yakasa as his deputy and chief of operations. There were fears that the suspension of Baki and the appointment of Wagambie would factionalize the police force, thus affecting police performance and putting public safety at risk.

Baki described his suspension as “improper, morally and ethically wrong.” He said that the government had a national responsibility and that the request for k10 million was to support police operations in the LNG areas and to avoid leaving the responsibility to the developer of the LNG project, ExxonMobil. Baki described his suspension as politically motivated and accused the government of using politics to destroy the police force.

Vanimo-Green MP Belden Namah accused the prime minister of tribalism and said that Somare had placed the country’s national security and sovereignty under serious threat by tribalizing the nation’s forces. The new police commissioner and the heads of the PNG Defence Force and the Correctional Service are all from the prime minister’s province of East Sepik (Post Courier, 12 Nov 2010).

Compensation claims against the State have been one of the major impediments to development in Papua New Guinea. The government has over the years paid millions of kina as compensation, sometimes to unreasonable claims. It was reported in November that Parliament would entertain a proposed law to do away with claims against the state. This is the first time a PNG government has taken steps to legislate claims against the State for damages, and it seeks to amend rights and freedom provisions of the constitution to deal with the problem. It was reported that the government is pushing the bill through Parliament under the auspices of maintaining greater public welfare and public order as stipulated under the constitution.

There were also a number of high-level visits to Papua New Guinea by foreign dignitaries. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton finally visited Port Moresby on 3 November after a planned trip in January was cancelled due to the earthquake in Haiti. In her key message, Secretary Clinton reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to help Papua New Guinea avoid the “resource curse” by building institutional capacity to govern revenue from its natural resource extraction.

“Thanks to your abundant natural resources, Papua New Guinea has the opportunity . . . to become a strong regional leader. . . . but there will have to be a commitment to good governance and accountability and transparency. . . . The United States stands ready to help translate your country’s natural resources into widespread
prosperity,” said Clinton. She said the Energy Governance and Capacity Initiative would seek to bolster institutional capacities related to governance, revenue management, and technical capabilities (Clinton 2010).

During her six-hour visit, Secretary Clinton announced that the United States will give more than US$100 million in climate-related funding to developing small island nations worldwide. Of this amount, more than US$21 million will be targeted specifically for climate adaptation programs and projects in Pacific Island countries over the next two years. Clinton also paid tribute to Papua New Guinean Thomas Maniwavie, who has committed his life to the protection and preservation of mangroves. The visit was also a boost for women pushing for the twenty-two reserved seats in Parliament.

Earlier in March, Indonesian President Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono paid a two-day visit to Somare in Port Moresby. On the occasion of the visit, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement, a Double Taxation Agreement, and Letters of Exchange in Agriculture (The National, 12–14 March 2010).

The two leaders also discussed issues of climate change, regional stability, and Indonesia’s support of the PNG effort to become a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Although the governor-general has no decision-making power and merely plays a symbolic role as the representative of the Queen of England, signing government appointments to formalize them, the position became politically contentious in the re-election of Sir Paulias Matane, who was the government’s favored candidate. It was alleged that Matane’s re-election was a constitutional blunder due to numerous breaches of the election process. According to lawyer Dr John Nonggorr, the open ballot breached section 88(2) of the constitution, which states that “a decision of the Parliament to nominate a person for appointment as governor-general shall be made by a simple majority vote, in an exhaustive secret ballot conducted in accordance with an Organic Law” (Post Courier, 29 June 2010).

The Supreme Court similarly ruled that Speaker Jeffery Nape breached section 88(2) of the constitution when he did not allow Parliament, through a simple majority, to vote for the new governor-general, nor did he allow other candidates to be considered for nomination from the floor. Nape had also breached section 95(4) of the constitution by exercising the powers, functions, duties, and responsibilities of the Speaker when he was, by virtue of section 95(2)(a), the acting governor-general. As a consequence of the serious nature and extent of the Speaker’s breaches of the constitution, and the circumstances in which they were committed, all proceedings of Parliament on 25 June over the nomination of the next governor-general, including all votes, decisions, determinations, rulings, and declarations, were declared unconstitutional and invalid (The National, 13 Dec 2010).

The court explained that at midnight on 26 May when Sir Paulias’s six-year term expired, Nape automatically took over as acting governor-general by operation of law; no formal advice or instrument of appointment had to be in place. From then until a new governor-general was appointed,
Deputy Speaker Francis Marus was to take charge of all parliamentary proceedings. However, according to the court, this did not happen. Nape had remained Speaker and did not perform any of the powers, functions, duties, or responsibilities of the acting governor-general (The National, 13 Dec 2010). The Speaker would only be relieved of this obligation (which would then be designated to the chief justice) if he was on leave, absent from the country, or out of reach of speedy and effective communication. There is no evidence that any such circumstances existed.

The Supreme Court reasoned that if it did not give such orders, there would be uncertainty, confusion, and too many unanswered questions, such as what action should the Parliament take next? What is the status of the incumbent governor-general? What is the status of the Speaker? (Post Courier, 17 Dec 2010).

On 10 December, the Supreme Court ruled that the election of Sir Paulias Matane as governor-general on 25 June was unconstitutional and instituted a forty-day directive for Parliament to elect a new governor-general. (The Opposition took the opportunity to announce their intention to institute a motion of no confidence against the prime minister when Parliament resumed to elect the governor-general.) The government sought legal advice on whether the Supreme Court had the powers to order Parliament to meet within forty days for this election. Public Services Minister Moses Maladina said that it was proper for the government to go back to the Supreme Court and seek its clarification on separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial arms of government.

In summary, the year 2010 was mired by several major political episodes: Parliament adjourned frequently and the Speaker refused to entertain votes of no confidence against the prime minister. The Opposition was determined to remove the prime minister by using every parliamentary sitting since the annulment of the provisions of the OLIIPAC, and often proposed members without solid background as alternative prime minister. Ministerial portfolios were constantly being swapped and the deputy prime minister was frequently replaced. While the OLIIPAC has significantly prevented party hopping, there appears to be a need for a similar mechanism to prevent or at least minimize changes in ministerial portfolios and departmental heads, as appointments are currently subject to the whims of the prime minister. There seems to be a strong preference for foreign investment over landowner rights and environmental protection, and the government must be cautious when it comes to accountability and liability issues for environmental catastrophes resulting from negligence. On the plus side, there is a dynamic participation of nongovernmental organizations, interest groups, women’s groups, and youth groups in debate on political issues and laws passed by Parliament. The involvement of these groups is vital to the scrutiny of government and the maintenance of democracy and must continue to ensure that the government does not arbitrarily use its powers.

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The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not represent those of his employer, the International Organization for Migration.

References


Solomon Islands

The Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (CNURA) government entered 2010 with a focus on the national general elections several months ahead. In the last two or so years that they were in power, the government recorded passing a higher number of legislations than any other government since independence. They also stabilized diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, and the case of a former attorney general—which was instrumental for the downfall of the government before CNURA—was brought before relevant authorities. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have set up offices in Honiara and are working well with the government. The first half of 2010 was occupied with the registration of voters and preparation for the national elections. This review concentrates on events leading up to the national elections, government formation, and some notable developments and events that occurred throughout the year.

Just before the dissolution of Parliament in 2010, then Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua attempted to push through what was called the Political Parties Integrity Bill, which was aimed at reducing political instability in government—an endemic feature of Solomon Islands politics (SSN, 22 April 2010). Unfortunately (or fortunately), it was defeated because of what Dr Sikua believed to be a move orches-
trated by some of his own ministers and backbenchers. This occurred on 24 April, two days before the dissolution of Parliament (SSN, 13 July 2010), and signaled an end to the solidarity of the CNURA, which was enthusiastic to enter the national election as a political group. At their meeting on 5 April 2010, the political parties that had been running the CNURA government (ie, National Party, Solomon Islands Democratic Party, Solomon Islands’ Party for Rural Advancement, Liberal Party, People’s Alliance Party, and the Association of Independents) had agreed to sign a preelection coalition agreement that would allow them to regroup after elections (STO, 7 April 2010). They felt that the CNURA government under Sikua’s leadership had achieved a lot and therefore should continue with its good work. The defeat of the Political Parties Integrity Bill ended what could have been a road to political stability in the legislature. Consequently, many more parties emerged to contest the elections, as will be discussed later.

While the CNURA government was still in caretaker mode, a second mobile service provider in the country established its infrastructure. This became possible after the monopoly over telecommunication services was removed in 2009. The Be-mobile company erected towers and set up an office in the country. It also promised to offer coverage for 25 percent of the population by mid-June 2010. There were concerns earlier that the company seemed like it was not making progress after it had obtained a license to operate. Indeed, the company was fined US$1.5 million for failing to launch its network on time (STO, 30 June 2010). Nevertheless, Be-mobile installed its towers and network, and by the end of August it launched its network with the tagline “mifala long hia nao” (we are now here) (STO, 31 Aug 2010). Solomon Islands Prime Minister Danny Philip praised Be-mobile, claiming that “the launch of Be-mobile’s network has brought the country to a new threshold of a new partnership and a new beginning for governments, the private sector and other stakeholders” (STO, 9 Nov 2010). This was a momentous achievement, as telecommunication prices were slashed because of the competition. Recent reports have it that, in the Pacific, Solomon Islands is now second only to Tonga in terms of mobile phone use (SSN, 2 Feb 2011).

Another notable development in 2010 was the progress toward reopening the Gold Ridge mine on Guadalcanal. The company was granted a loan of US$35 million by the International Finance Corporation to facilitate developments toward reopening the mine (SIBC, 25 June 2010). By May 2010, big machines and equipment for work on the mining site were arriving in the country. It is hoped that the gold mine will start production in March 2011 (SSN, 26 June 2010). The construction of resettlement/relocation villages was also reportedly going well, with a total of 320 houses being built (SSN, 23 Aug 2010). Drilling at Gold Ridge was also going well, with the company targeting 320,000 ounces per year by 2015 (SSN, 12 Nov 2010). Nevertheless, a number of outstanding issues with landowners might hinder progress toward reopening. In March 2010, landowners and mine workers called on the company to remove
the general manager over allegations of mistreatment of workers (mostly from neighboring villages) and neglect of occupational health and safety requirements in the workplace (sto, 27 March 2010). Three mine workers, believed to have been affected by cyanide poisoning, were taken to a hospital in Honiara. Unfortunately, there was no proper facility to test cyanide poisoning in Honiara, so the doctor recommended they be sent overseas for testing. These events, plus complaints about people getting itchy rashes after using the river downstream, forced landowners to follow through on their threat of roadblocks, which they carried out in July 2010. Their concern was the company’s failure to provide water supplies as agreed to earlier (sto, 13 March 2010). Toward the end of 2010, the landowners were becoming skeptical of the company for not addressing outstanding issues, and this could potentially delay the first gold pour expected in March 2011 (ssn, 7 Feb 2011).

Two important commissions trying to find solutions to the roots of the 1998–2003 tensions—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Enquiry into Land Dealings and Abandoned Properties on Guadalcanal (Celdapg)—continued their work in 2010. The TRC, launched by Bishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in 2009, toured the provinces, talking to people who had been victims and perpetrators/offenders during the 1998–2003 tensions. The commission discovered that many people are still suffering from post-traumatic stress (ssn, 9 April 2010). Moreover, people opened up and told their stories, including forty-five victims in Gizo, Western Province (ssn, 10 July 2010). Like victims in other provinces, those from Gizo testified about missing members of their families, imprisonments, physical and psychological abuse, loss of properties through destruction or forced removal, and other horrific experiences (ssn, 11 March 2010). Some are still waiting for clues on the whereabouts of the remains of their loved ones. For example, a Malaitan mother pleaded with the TRC to locate the body of her husband who went missing at the height of the tensions (ssn, 26 Nov 2010). The TRC had identified up to 150 grave sites by December, and plans to exhume them are underway (ssn, 8 Dec 2010). Others, like a child soldier from Guadalcanal, revealed their experiences and how they got involved (ssn, 25 Nov 2010).

In spite of the tedious and painstaking work, the TRC has achieved a great deal by providing an avenue for people to start their own healing process through its open, genuine, and transparent process.

The other commission, Celdapg, also started off on a high note after its establishment. The commission is headed by Brian Brunton of Papua New Guinea and assisted by Commissioners Manoa Rabuka and Stephen Tagi of Fiji and Vanuatu, respectively. Technical and support staff are also assisting the commission. At the onset of their work, a prominent Guadalcanal leader, Waita Ben Tabusasi, expressed concern that the terms of reference of the commission fell “short of taking into consideration the intentions of those who authored, negotiated and signed the Townsville Peace
Agreement . . . namely the government and former combatants of both Malaita and Guadalcanal” (STO, 28 Aug 2009). Nevertheless, the commission held consultative meetings in their Honiara office and other regions of Guadalcanal. Unfortunately, its efforts were abruptly stopped in late 2010 amid allegations of misuse of funds and cronyism on the part of the chairman and some local officers. A counsel assisting the enquiry, Ruth Townsend, publicly claimed that employees were defrauding the commission. Examples of alleged unethical deals include the purchase of a computer supposedly worth $389,800, with that amount then deducted from the commission’s funds, and the payment for ten flash drives that supposedly cost $12,000 ($1$ is approximately US$1.2). The seriousness of allegations published by Ms Townsend in local media outlets was enough for the government to put a halt to the work of Celdapg for two months to allow for police investigation (SSN, 29 Oct 2010). Another commission mandated to deal with land belonging to Russell Islands Plantations Enterprises Limited was also suspended indefinitely because its mandate had been extended four times with no concrete findings. As of the end of the year no word has come from the government regarding these investigations or whether or not Celdapg will continue with its work.

Of course, the peak of Solomon Islands national politics in 2010 was the administration of the national general elections and subsequent formation of a government. With the announcement of 6 August as the date to elect members of the 9th Parliament, nineteen political parties were registered, and 508 candidates contested the fifty-two constituencies. The total number of registered voters was recorded as 448,259 (STO, 19 July 2010). From the onset, discrepancies in voter registration were noted. For instance, in a presentation at the University of Canterbury, Paul Roughan argued that if the 1999 census report is something to go by, the total number of eligible voters for 2010 would be around 265,000. Likewise, the estimated number of eligible voters for Honiara alone would be around 31,600. However, for the 2010 elections, the number of voters registered for Honiara had increased by 349 percent to reach 110,572 voters, while the number for the whole country increased by 169 percent to 448,259 registered voters (Roughan 2010).

With limited time and resources to sort out these discrepancies, the Electoral Commission proceeded with the election. The results of the elections revealed that a majority of elected members of Parliament were newcomers. At the same time, none of the political parties that contested the election emerged with significant numbers of elected members. Only the Solomon Islands Democratic Party won as many as 13 seats, while 19 members were voted in as Independents. Eleven political parties secured 3 seats or fewer, while six parties did not win any seats at all. Given that scenario, the only way to form a new government was through a coalition.

Although the 2010 election was generally peaceful, certain communities received the results with mixed feelings. In North East Guadalcanal,
for instance, a public vehicle carrying passengers and market produce was pelted with stones simply because they were from the winning candidate's neighboring villages. Similarly, in Auki, Malaita, there was an incident of ballot box burning during the counting day. The dissenters argued that there were more ballots than the number of registered voters \( (ISN, 10 \text{ Aug 2010}) \). Likewise, in Lata, Temotu, the supporters of a long-serving politician who lost his seat broke into the shop owned by the winning candidate \( (ISN, 6 \text{ Aug 2010}) \). These incidents of violence and overt protests over the declaration of some results reflect tendencies in Solomon Islands since the social tensions of 1998–2003.

Lobbying commenced soon after election results were declared, with three political camps visible. One, comprising the Independent members of Parliament, was based at the Honiara Hotel, while a group headed by the leader of the Solomon Islands Democratic Party and prominent members of the former CNURA government camped at the Heritage Park Hotel. The third group, led by the leader of the Reformed Democratic Party, Danny Philip, came together at the Pacific Casino Hotel. Contradictory messages as to who would form the government came from the three camps, with members of Parliament appearing in group photos of the three camps obtained by the local media \( (SIBC, 11 \text{ Aug 2010}) \). As lobbying intensified, only the Honiara Hotel and Heritage Park Hotel camps confirmed their intentions to contest the prime minister's position. Members in the Pacific Casino Hotel were absorbed into the other two camps, with Danny Philip becoming the official prime minister candidate for the Honiara Hotel camp. The election of the prime minister went in favor of the Honiara Hotel group, twenty-six votes to twenty-three, and Danny Philip was duly elected the new prime minister of Solomon Islands in 2010 \( (STO, 25 \text{ Aug 2010}) \). He formed the National Coalition for Reform and Advancement \( (NCRA) \) after his appointment.

On the international front, the Solomon Islands government officially opened its High Commission in Fiji in December 2010 and appointed His Excellency Moses Kouni Mose as the first Solomon Islands high commissioner to Fiji. The office has become necessary because Fiji has the largest population of Solomon Islanders studying and working outside of the country. Business and trade considerations between these two Melanesian countries necessitated this move as well. Apart from that, the nation's leaders delivered addresses at prominent forums. On 15 November 2010, Prime Minister Danny Philip gave an address to the World Ocean Forum in Busan, Korea, on the importance of marine ecosystems to Pacific Islands livelihoods and economies. During the conference, he echoed the idea that “we are the nursery of the biodiversity and the ecosystem of our ocean” \( (SSN, 16 \text{ Nov 2010}) \). Also, the minister of foreign affairs and external trade addressed the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly on 27 September 2010. Among other things, he reported to the world forum that Solomon Islands has a “mixed, uneven and off the track” scorecard on achieving the Millennium
Development Goals by the expected 2015 date.

On the regional front, Solomon Islands played an important role in mending rifts among Melanesian political leaders. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders were on bad terms over who should chair the subregional body. Since the frustration of Fiji’s plans to host an MSG meeting under its chairmanship in mid-2010, Fiji and Vanuatu were not on good terms, and Fiji withdrew from participating in MSG matters. Vanuatu was reluctant to hand over the chairmanship role to Fiji, citing the Fiji regime’s undemocratic ascent to power. Political events in Vanuatu forced then Prime Minister Edward Natapei out of office, and a more conciliatory person, the Honorable Sato, became Vanuatu’s new prime minister. (Natapei was removed for missing three consecutive sittings of Parliament without providing reasons for his absences.) The Solomon Islands government then intervened in the MSG matter and invited leaders of both Fiji and Vanuatu to Honiara, where a traditional reconciliation was held, after which the MSG chairmanship was handed over to Fiji (SSN, 16 Dec 2010).

Solomon Islands also hosted a meeting of Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus officials in Honiara. This was a summit of senior trade officials from around the Pacific who are to make recommendations to the next Forum Trade Ministers meeting. Opening the discussion, Solomon Islands Minister of Finance Gordon Lilo asked the participants to be conscious of the differences in the development levels between negotiating partners (STO, 22 Oct 2010). A few months earlier, then Minister of Foreign Affairs William Haomae shared similar sentiments but went further, saying that Australia was not listening to Pacific Island countries with regard to PACER-Plus talks (STO, 1 April 2010). This particular PACER-Plus officials’ meeting was an important development since it engaged for the first time with the annual Non-State Actors (NSA) Dialogue. The dialogue was organized with the help of the Pacific Islands Forum to engage the NSA in discussions about PACER-Plus negotiations. The general sentiment shared by the NSA was the need to properly carry out national consultations on PACER-Plus without rushing to finalize the agreement. The chair of the NSA Dialogue over PACER-Plus put it succinctly, stating that “time and money will not go to waste if talks to set up a free trade area between the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand are not successful” (SSN, 18 Oct 2010).

The NCRA government started office with a slim majority. When Prime Minister Philip announced his cabinet lineup on 25 August 2010, two former militant leaders-turned-members of Parliament were in the group, leaving many people skeptical of the government’s intentions. Also on that date, a tragic event occurred when the newly elected member for the Shortland Islands, the Honorable Steven Laore, passed away after a party to commemorate the formation of the government. He had aligned himself with the NCRA government, so the numbers were shaky from day one. Moreover, a number of government ministers are facing court cases for a
variety of alleged crimes. For instance, Jimmy Lusibaea, Mark Kemakeza, and David Pacha all have court cases outstanding but were still appointed as ministers (STO, 10 Dec 2010). Lusibaea was subsequently imprisoned for crimes committed during the tensions with a sentence of two years and nine months but was released in early 2011 by the parole board. His controversial release received immense opposition from professional bodies, prominent citizens, opposition members of Parliament, and civil society (STO, 17 Jan 2011). This contentious case is unlikely to end here and may continue to be featured in 2011.

Another renowned politician, Toswell Kaua, passed away in November 2010. Kaua had aligned himself with the Opposition. Toward the end of the year, the prime minister sacked his minister of forestry, Bobo Dettke, but later reinstated him as the minister of fisheries when Lusibaea was jailed. Dettke continued with the government as minister of fisheries until he and three other ministers resigned in early 2011 and joined the Opposition. The numbers game has dominated Solomon Islands politics so much that the NCRA government has not even started implementing its grand plans (OPM 2010), but they may be able to begin to do so once the 2011 budget is passed in March 2011.

Despite the opportunities and positive developments that emerged throughout 2010, power politicking obscured the leadership’s prerogative to serve and direct the nation and its people. Examples of such negative leadership traits can be seen in the recent movements by the members for north Guadalcanal, Martin Sopaghe, and for Ngella, Mark Kemakeza. Over the course of a month, they both moved twice between the government and the Opposition, making a mockery of parliamentary procedures and office oaths. This sentiment, shared by many people, was well stated by Pastor George Tafoa of the South Seas Evangelical Church when he lamented that “ministers when taking up their oath of allegiance swore before god to remain faithful to their government, only to break this promise by switching to the other side of the house” (ISN, 4 Feb 2011).

With the way things were in late 2010 and early 2011, the ruling government may sooner or later give way to another coalition. At the time of this review, the NCRA government was ruling with a minority after five cabinet ministers had moved to support the Opposition. (A constitutional crisis was subsequently averted with the defection of six Opposition members to the government in early April.) Whatever happens, the question remains: How do Solomon Islands leaders ensure that services are rendered to citizens? The answer may lie in their ability to concentrate on the business of governing and leading instead of expending too much energy on pure power politics. The country’s future in 2011 and beyond is in the hands of political leaders. One thing is certain: there is a need for Solomon Islanders to revolutionize the way they have been approaching development since independence and to put people’s needs and livelihoods at the core of their deliberations.

GORDON LEUA NANAU
References


Vanuatu

As 2010 got underway, the issue of the status of the Speaker of Parliament, Maxime Carlot Korman, held over from last year, remained to be dealt with. In late November 2009, the Vanua’aku Pati (VP) prime minister, Edward Natapei, had removed two parties from the governing coalition—the National United Party (NUP) led by Ham Lini, and the Vanuatu Republican Party (VRP) led by Korman. Natapei replaced them with the Alliance Group and its fifteen associated members of Parliament, led by Sato Kilman from the island of Malakula, leader of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP), who was made deputy prime minister (VDP, 20 Nov 2009). The position of the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) within the coalition, led by Serge Vohor, was strengthened in the reshuffle with the allocation of two additional ministerial portfolios.

In a move most likely aimed at protecting his position as Speaker, Korman declared late November that the prime minister had lost his seat because he had not obtained permission to be absent from Parliament. Natapei had left Vanuatu in November to attend an overseas meeting, which coincided with the last session of Parliament. Natapei protested that he had let the Speaker know and, on his return, had obtained a Supreme Court ruling that the Speaker’s decision was unconstitutional (VDP, 7 Dec 2009). However, Natapei found that he was also facing a no-confidence motion tabled by Ham Lini, the new leader of the Opposition. The government had hoped to remove the Speaker at the same time as Parliament voted on the motion of no confidence, which was easily defeated, but Korman was able to manipulate standing orders to avoid a vote on his own position. He remained as Speaker until January 2010, when the government called an extraordinary session of Parliament with the intention of removing him. However, rather than being voted out, he resigned. In the election that followed, the government’s nominee for Speaker, Luganville MP George Wells (NUP), defeated Korman, the Opposition’s nominee, in a secret ballot by thirty-two votes to nineteen (VDP, 30 Jan 2010).

Resolution of the issue of the Speaker concluded the process of restructuring the government coalition that had begun toward the end of November 2009, but, as the motion of no confidence indicated, the political
situation was not settled. At the time of the November reshuffle, Natapeti also used the opportunity to remove renegade Tanna MP Harry Iauko (VP), who held the position of minister of lands (VDP, 18 Nov 2009). Iauko had been accused of corruption over land dealings and suspended as a member of the Vanua‘aku Pati since 2008 when he decided to support a no-confidence motion against Natapeti. The vote for the new Speaker was significant, as it indicated that six members of Parliament from the government had joined the Opposition and voted for Korman. The Natapeti-led government had a total of thirty-nine members, compared to thirteen in the Opposition. It emerged that the six government members who voted for the Opposition nominee were led by MP Harry Iauko and included two other VP members plus three independents (Independent, 30 Jan–5 Feb 2010).

The Vanua‘aku Pati’s problem with Harry Iauko goes back over a decade to when he became an active member of the party on his home island of Tanna. He identified himself with those who called for the main parties to open opportunities for younger members—something that established party leaders were usually prepared to support in principle but found difficult to put into practice. Iauko and his supporters were instrumental in electing Natapeti president at the VP’s 1999 Ipota Congress on Erromango, defeating Donald Kalpokas, who was one of the founding fathers and VP president. This proved to be extremely divisive. The Natapeti/Iauko faction targeted Kalpokas in the 2004 election, causing him to lose his seat. Since that time, however, the old VP stalwarts have gradually united around Natapeti, leaving Iauko frustrated and vengeful. Indeed, Natapeti and Iauko no longer have the close political relationship they once had.

Iauko’s ambition finally led him to run for Parliament in the 2008 election when he succeeded in securing the highest number of votes of any candidate on Tanna, which saw the Vanua‘aku Pati gain four of the seven seats in the constituency. Following this result, Iauko clearly expected a ministerial portfolio in the new VP-led coalition government, which also included NUP with Ham Lini as deputy prime minister. However, this did not happen. As usual, the new prime minister, Edward Natapeti, faced the difficult task of balancing the thirteen available portfolios among coalition partners and regions/islands within the country. Iauko was not happy to have been denied a portfolio and was even more incensed ten days later when he was again ignored in another vote of no confidence. Iauko’s response was to lead another vote of no confidence, which also failed.

Finally, in June 2009, Iauko got his chance during another reshuffle and was made minister of lands, despite the fact that he was still under suspension from the Vanua‘aku Pati (VDP, 16 June 2009). However, as noted earlier, after only five months, as part of the reshuffle in late November 2009, Natapeti decided to take the opportunity to remove Iauko as minister of lands.

By this time, Iauko had clearly
decided that the only way to achieve recognition by the Vanua‘aku Pati was to challenge the leadership of the party itself. During 2009 he traveled around the country seeking support among VP members by organizing subcommittees to back him in an attempt to take over as party president at the next VP congress, which was scheduled for 2009. According to the VP constitution, congresses should take place once a year. However, the party executive, of which he was not a member, did not hold a congress in 2008 and postponed that of 2009 until 2010. In response, Iauko’s supporters organized a petition among VP members in an attempt to force an early meeting in January 2010, but the party executive preferred May or June.

At the same time, Natapei, as VP president, issued warning letters to members of the party who had pledged their support for the petition, accusing them of colluding with a suspended member to destabilize the party and threatening them and their subcommittees with suspension. When political parties are unable to solve internal disputes (a common occurrence in Vanuatu), they refer them to the courts. This is what happened with the case of the VP, resulting in a court order requiring Vanua‘aku Pati to hold its congress on 1 April 2010 at Lumbukuti on the island of Tongoa in the Shepherd Group (VDP, 6, 21, 22, 23 Jan 2010; 6 Feb 2010).

During the congress, the party executive planned to introduce a number of changes to the VP constitution, but the biggest issue to be dealt with was the election of a new executive. Harry Iauko made no secret of the fact that he intended to challenge Edward Natapei for the position of president and hoped to be able to replace the entire executive with his own supporters. He claimed to have 300 subcommittees pledged to him, but whether they were registered according to party procedures with valid signatures was in dispute (VDP, 10 Feb 2010).

One week before the VP congress, Natapei announced that no new subcommittees would be allowed at the Tongoa congress unless they had been approved at the last one in 2007. According to VP procedures, all new subcommittees had to be verified according to specific criteria. Since this had not been done with regard to those supporting Iauko, his support base was effectively denied permission to participate (VDP, 24 March 2010). Nevertheless, Iauko moved on, chartering a plane and a boat to transport his subcommittees to Tongoa (VDP, 25 March 2010).

Not surprisingly, the opening of the congress at Lumbukuti village was delayed due to disputes over which subcommittees should be registered. There was potential for violence between the opposing groups, and Natapei and the executive, through their lawyer in Port Vila, obtained two court injunctions in an attempt to restrain Iauko and his supporters. Consequently, Natapei and his executive decided to move the congress to the nearby village of Panita. Iauko, however, proceeded to organize the election of a new executive at Lumbukuti. He was elected president, Tongoa MP Willie Ruben Abel vice president, and Natapei (in his absence) secretary-general—Iauko obviously believing that he could continue to use Natapei to divide the party to his advantage.
Natapei and the existing party executive, however, continued with what they claimed was the official congress at Panita. The result was, and still is, that two individuals now claim to be VP president, Natapei arguing that the Lumbukuti congress was illegal and that the results of the Panita congress reflected the legitimate wishes of the party (VDP, 7 April 2010; Independent, 17–23 April 2010). With Iauko adamant that he represented the legitimate Vanua’aku Pati, of which he was the true leader, the Natapei faction again turned to the Supreme Court to resolve the impasse.

Having been expelled from the party by the Panita congress, Iauko and Abel joined the Opposition in Parliament, Iauko becoming its deputy leader while still claiming to represent the Vanua’aku Pati (VDP, 19 May 2010). Owing to the confusion within the VP, the Speaker of Parliament required all members to declare their party affiliation. This revealed that in June, government numbers remained intact at 34: Vanua’aku Pati (Natapei group) 9, Union of Moderate Parties 8, and the Alliance Group 17 (including members from the People’s Progressive Party, Green Confederation, Namangie Aute, Vanuatu Progressive Republican Farmer Party, Shepherds Alliance, Vanuatu National Party, People’s Action Party, and independents, including Ralph Regenvanu). Opposition numbers totaled 18: Vanuatu Republican Party 8, National United Party 5, Vanua’aku Pati (Iauko group) 2, Labour Party 2, and Nagriamel 1 (VDP, 1 June 2010).

It took well over a month for the Natapei group to submit to the Supreme Court documentation challenging Iauko’s claim. The application asked the court to declare null and void the meeting held by the “Iauko faction” and the elections of Iauko as president and the other members of the executive; most importantly, they sought a ruling that the defendants not be allowed to use the name Vanua’aku Pati (VDP, 21 May 2010). At the end of the year, the court had yet to deliver a judgment, apparently due to the slowness of the VP executive in submitting the application papers and following up on procedures. As a result, the Vanua’aku Pati—the party of independence and the current senior member of the governing coalition—began to appear weak and disengaged. Indeed, Opposition leader Ham Lini complained at the end of April that the government had still not set a date for the first ordinary sitting of Parliament, which, under standing orders, was required to be held by the middle of May at the latest (VDP, 30 April 2010).

In contrast, the other parties, both within government and the Opposition, used the opportunity to present themselves as far as possible in a positive light. Various meetings and congresses took place, often reported as preparation for the next election, despite the fact that it was not due to be held until September 2012. In May, the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), the oldest francophone party, held its congress on the island of Pentecost. Serge Vohor, who was reelected UMP president unopposed, boasted about the party’s achievements over the years and promised to review government land policies, which dated back to independence and were causing many Ni-Vanuatu to lose their land. In a
fascinating turnaround, Vohor claimed that UMP had been the first party to take the issue of independence to the United Nations. This is impossible as UMP was not founded until 1983, when a number of francophone parties that had resisted independence united to form a single party. Repeating a promise he had made in 2008, when UMP was brought into the governing coalition, Vohor pledged continued loyalty to the Natapeti-led government until the next election (Independent, 29 May–4 June 2010).

The political group that had, in fact, first raised the issue of independence before the United Nations was Nagriamel (formerly a “movement” led by the infamous Jimmy Stevens from the island of Santo), which became heavily involved in the 1980 secessionist rebellion against the future independent Republic of Vanuatu. Nagriamel somehow survived the arrest and imprisonment of many of its leaders—Jimmy Stevens, now deceased, had been sentenced to fourteen years for his involvement—and has emerged as one of the small parties that regularly field candidates in national elections and occasionally win seats in areas where they were strong historically. Nagriamel succeeded in winning one seat in the 2008 election on the island of Malo. At its congress in May, the party members elected a full executive, but surprisingly, none of the office bearers were from the Stevens family, although Jimmy Stevens had numerous children, two of whom, Franky and Yakato, have been involved in politics since his death (VDP, 15 May 2010). It remains to be seen if this marks the beginning of the transformation of Nagriamel from what some considered a cult movement, solely identified with its founder Jimmy Stevens, to a more modern political organization.

The People’s Progressive Party, which won four seats in the 2008 election, made news during 2010 by announcing its increased support on various islands, and the party’s leader, Sato Kilman, became president of the Alliance Group and deputy prime minister within the coalition (VDP, 18 June 2010). At the party congress in September, Kilman was reelected as president and pledged continued allegiance to the Natapeti-led coalition government (VDP, 9 Sept 2010).

On the Opposition side, the National United Party held its congress in September and reelected Ham Lini unopposed as president, though it was said there were two groups lobbying for the position during the lead-up to the congress. As this is the party of Lini’s now deceased brother, Father Walter Lini, it is hard to imagine someone other than a member of the Lini family as NUP leader. Indeed, Ham Lini was elected unopposed to replace his brother in the 1999 by-election. During 2010, from time to time he traded places with Maxime Carlot Corman (VRP) as leader of the Opposition. In November 2009, as noted earlier, Natapeti had removed the National United Party from the government for failing to discipline some of its members for serious allegations of corruption. As a result of Lini’s poor handling of NUP affairs, several dissatisfied members of Parliament had withdrawn to join other parties, 2 to the Alliance Group and 1 each to the Vanua’aku Pati and the Vanuatu Republican Party. As a
result, only 3 NUP members remained in Parliament.

It is not clear why the other major political party, the Vanuatu Republican Party, did not meet officially during 2010, though the decision by two members to side with the government rather than with Korman in a coalition reshuffle later in the year would indicate some division within party ranks. Korman, therefore, may have been reluctant to call a congress, but he remained party president.

A development that surprisingly warranted only a back-page report in the Daily Post was the establishment in early November of a new political party, the Graon mo Jastis Party (Land and Justice Party), by popular independent Port Vila MP Ralph Regenvanu (VDP, 11 Nov 2010). In the 2008 election Regenvanu received the highest number of votes in the history of elections in Vanuatu, campaigning against government corruption and failure to prosecute cases of official breaches of the law, the poor performance of government generally in providing services to the public, and the loss of land rights through a poorly structured leasing policy in the face of increasing land speculation by foreign investors. These are all issues that Regenvanu actively continued to promote during 2010. Looking toward the 2012 election, Regenvanu announced that he would be seeking suitable candidates in the islands to run under the Graon mo Jastis Party in the hope of entering Parliament with a block of new members, large enough to have an influence on coalition formation and government policy generally. It will be a challenge to find good people, committed to Regenvanu’s goals and with the strength to resist pressure from other parties and politicians to sell out in return for special favors (VDP, 15 Nov 2010).

During 2010, community frustration remained high over the continued inability (or unwillingness) of the government to deal with pressing problems and alleged illegal activities by politicians and government officials, some of which date back several years. The weekly Vanuatu Independent resumed publication of a list of “Answers Still Urgently Needed from Government,” many relating to issues regularly raised by Transparency Vanuatu in its column published in the Daily Post. Of particular concern was the inaction of government to respond to public demand for an amendment to the Ombudsman’s Act, giving the ombudsman power to prosecute people following the publication of reports (Independent, 20–26 Feb 2010).

The mistreatment of prisoners continued to be of considerable concern in 2010 following the major breakout from the Vila prison in late 2008, and the arrest of MPs Ralph Regenvanu and Moana Carcasses, who had attempted to provide some protection against feared police reprisals. Both had their cases dropped. The community was shocked by the prison escape, but even more by the assault of Marc Neil-Jones, the publisher of the Daily Post, EPHPEHUVRIWKH RUUHFWLRQDO6HUYLFHV-RVXOD%RQJ to step down. To this day, the officers involved have not been brought to
justice, while Bong was subsequently appointed commissioner of police.

Related to this incident is the even more serious unresolved case of a young man from the island of Ambae by the name of James Bule, who was arrested for an offense, joined the major breakout from prison, was re-apprehended, and then died in custody on 29 March 2009 from severe injuries to his body while in the hands of members of the Vanuatu Military Force (VMF). After much delay, caused by the difficulty in procuring the required documentation from the VMF, in March 2011 the coroner, Nevin Dawson (a Supreme Court judge seconded from New Zealand), presented a scathing report of the evidence given at the inquest. Dawson stated that the VMF, from the top brass to the lower-ranked officers, appeared to have contrived their reports, indicating a predetermined plan of what would be told to the inquest and what would be withheld. Commissioner Bong, it was reported, had to be recalled twice for failure to produce a number of required documents, including a duty roster for the night in question, which appeared to be at least partially a fabrication. Dawson was appalled by what he described as extraordinarily obstructive behavior by the country’s leading law enforcement officer (VDP, 6 March 2010).

Dawson also said in his report that the VMF had breached Vanuatu’s constitution, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and the rule of law. He called for homicide and assault investigations into Bule’s death, perjury inquiries into the evidence given by Vanuatu’s police commissioner, and radical changes to police systems. In addition to the attempts made to undermine the inquiry, Judge Dawson revealed that a senior VMF officer had issued a death threat against him in the presence of numerous witnesses, and rifle-waving VMF officers had made shows of force near the courtroom. New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully expressed his government’s concern regarding the threats and police brutality, which he said could adversely affect continued aid to Vanuatu. McCully also intended to consult with his Australian counterpart, given that targeted assistance to the VMF was a major Australian aid project (VDP, 15 March 2010).

The Government of Vanuatu’s response, delivered by the Acting Minister for Internal Affairs Sato Kilman, stressed the government’s commitment to the rule of law and emphasized the special conditions under which the VMF were acting at the time of the incident—protecting the community from dangerous escaped prisoners. In Kilman’s view, the main purpose of the coroner’s report was to raise awareness of measures that need to be taken to ensure that such incidents do not occur in future, for example, preparing proper interrogation procedures and facilities, introducing new legislation that addresses the functions of the VMF in relation to internal security, and so forth. Nowhere in the announcement printed in the Daily Post did Kilman address the issue of instituting proper investigations into the allegations made by Judge Dawson in his report (VDP, 1 April 2010). It is significant to note that as the year ended, no
criminal charges had been laid by the public prosecutor against any of the individuals named in the report. The role of Vanuatu uniformed officials in guaranteeing public safety continues to be a serious problem.

The media became an issue in Vanuatu during 2010 with Transparency Vanuatu, which contributes regularly to the Daily Post, publishing an article in May on the issue of media freedom and freedom of information in Vanuatu. Transparency Vanuatu pointed out that the government had dominant control over the flow of news, seldom holding news conferences and only reacting to events under concerted pressure from the media and the public, usually in cursory responses to radio talk-back shows and letters to the editor. Moreover, the government operates the only local television station and, while Vanuatu enjoys three regularly published newspapers (one daily and two weeklies), there is limited analysis of the news due to a dearth of investigative journalism.

According to Transparency Vanuatu, this journalistic reticence can be explained by the government’s history of threats and intimidation. A British journalist was deported in 1983 (MacClancy 1984, 109); the editor of the government media services was dismissed in 1991 for his refusal to cease publishing political news (Van Trease 1995, 112–113); and the current publisher of the Daily Post, Marc Neil-Jones, was also deported, although the order was successfully overturned following a court appeal. As noted earlier, Neil-Jones was also physically assaulted in 2009 in his office following an editorial he wrote describing the deficiencies in the Correctional Services that resulted in the prison breakout and death in custody of the recaptured prisoner, James Bule (vdp, 7 May 2010).

In addition, debate over media ownership in Vanuatu surfaced as a hot issue, at least in the media, when Neil-Jones submitted an application for a broadcasting license. The Media Association of Vanuatu (Media Association of Vanuatu) opposed the application on the grounds that the media industry should be included in the reserve list of businesses that are restricted to indigenous Ni-Vanuatu. A pro-indigenous media article appeared in the weekly Vanuatu Times (whose director coincidentally also operates an FM radio station), arguing that indigenous people are being disadvantaged because foreigners are allowed to invest in Vanuatu. Furthermore, the Vanuatu Times owner accused Neil-Jones of violating the media code of ethics and abusing media freedom by “using the newspaper to cause problems in society”—an obvious reference to his hard-hitting reporting. Neil-Jones responded, in a letter to the Vanuatu Times, that he had lived in Vanuatu for seventeen years and was a naturalized citizen and therefore entitled under the constitution to the same treatment and benefits as any indigenous Ni-Vanuatu. However, the Vanuatu Times refused to publish the letter and Neil-Jones ended up printing it in his own Daily Post (vdp, 26 Oct 2010).

The acting prime minister, when asked his opinion on the issue, replied that media ownership should be open to all citizens of Vanuatu (vdp, 21 Oct 2010). One outraged reader wrote to the Daily Post, defending freedom of the press and condemning the call
for the government to implement a media policy “folem colour blo skin emi [according to skin color] as pure racism, period!” (VDP, 3 Nov 2010).

Several foreign policy issues also had a significant impact on local politics during 2010. One in particular, a dispute between Vanuatu and France over the ownership of two uninhabited volcanic islands to the extreme south of the group, Matthew and Hunter, aroused considerable public interest and seemed to unite opposing political factions. The problem predates independence, when Vanuatu’s two former colonial powers, Great Britain and France, failed to deal with the issue. Matthew and Hunter became a diplomatic problem in 2010 when the Government of Vanuatu submitted a bill to Parliament for the Maritime Zone Act, spelling out Vanuatu’s territorial rights and including the two disputed islands within the country’s boundary.

Vanuatu’s claim is based on custom and the legendary god Majikijiki, who arrived in the southern islands via Umaeneag (Hunter) and Umaenupne (Matthew) in the distant past, and the fact that these islands geologically form part of the Vanuatu island chain, separated from New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands by the continental shelf and the New Hebrides Trench. Taking advantage of the lack of formal documentation during the days of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, and ignoring a Kanak liberation movement pronouncement that the indigenous people of New Caledonia had no claim on the two southern islands, the French government decided to insist more vigorously on its claim to sovereignty and became particularly concerned when the Vanuatu government submitted the bill to Parliament (Makin 2010).

In January there was a political complication when it was reported that Minister of Internal Affairs Moana Carcasses (the only naturalized citizen in Parliament, a Francophone and the leader of the Greens in the Alliance Group) had on a visit to New Caledonia allegedly told French officials that the majority of the population of the southern islands of Vanuatu did not agree with the government’s stance on Matthew and Hunter (VDP, 20 Jan 2010). Prime Minister Natapei came under pressure to discipline his minister but refused to do so, claiming that the incident was based merely on speculation (VDP, 30 Jan 2010). Several months later, however, it was reported and confirmed by Carcasses himself that the French ambassador to Vanuatu had paid him a visit to express France’s concern about the bill. Ham Lini, the leader of the Opposition, accused France of “interference in the internal affairs of the nation” and alleged that the ambassador had threatened the possibility of France “withdrawing its aid assistance to Vanuatu” if the bill were passed—this being the reason, he said, for the government’s decision to temporarily withdraw the bill from debate. At the same time, Lini accused the Natapei government of being divided on the matter of how to deal with the French threat (VDP, 7 June 2010).

The ambassador denied the accusation of interference, stating that “the French authorities wish this question to be discussed with the same friendly spirit that presides over all Vanuatu and France relations,” noting the various ways in which Vanuatu benefited
from its cooperation with France. The acting leader of the Opposition at this time, Harry Iauko, strongly criticized the Natapei-led government for allowing the French government to use aid money to buy influence in Vanuatu and implied that if the late Father Walter Lini and Barak Sope (who was first secretary to the government in the early 1980s) were still in power, the ambassador would probably be deported for political interference (VDP, 8 June 2010). It is interesting to note that in criticizing Natapei, Iauko (one of the so-called young politicians) had become the champion of replacing the old guard.

Over the next few days, the president of the Malvatuma (the National Council of Chiefs), individual chiefs from Tanna, and a former president, Jean-Marie Léyé from Aneityum (the island closest to Matthew and Hunter) spoke out against the French claim to the islands (VDP, 11 June, 16 June 2010). In addition, several articles and letters to the editor also appeared in the local press condemning the French position and the attitude of some Francophones—in effect, questioning their loyalty to Vanuatu (VDP, 12 June 2010). Likewise, a surprisingly confrontational letter appeared in the Daily Post from “A worried Indigenous Citizen” raising the issue of the French ambassador’s visit to Minister Carcasses. It pointed out that the minister was a Francophone and nonindigenous—a matter seldom raised in public and indicating that the old Anglophone/Francophone divide is still a factor in politics and, indeed, an especially potent one when the issue of France’s attitude toward Vanuatu is in question (VDP, 10 June 2010). The bill was reintroduced and a vote took place on 17 June amid much confusion. A group of chiefs from the southern island of Tanna who had gathered to ensure that the bill was debated were excluded from Parliament by the Speaker, who feared disruptive behavior. The bill passed, but without the Opposition, who claimed to support it but then refused to vote because of the Speaker’s decision to exclude the Tanna chiefs (VDP, 19 June 2010).

Passage of the Maritime Zone Act did nothing to end the dispute between Vanuatu and France, and the issue resurfaced in November, when rumors circulated in the community that a secret government plan to send the country’s naval patrol boat, Tukoro, to visit the islands had been intercepted by French intelligence in Noumea. It was reported, though she denied it, that the French ambassador visited the Tukoro to discourage the undertaking of the trip. Indeed, it transpired that the ambassador had instead actually gone to the Office of Maritime Surveillance and the commissioner of police—in itself, a shockingly confrontational and undiplomatic act. Nevertheless, the ambassador’s action raised concerns in some quarters, and the revelation that the French government was spying on the sovereign state of Vanuatu evoked the headline in the Daily Post: “France Bullies Vanuatu over Matthew, Hunter” (VDP, 28 Oct, 30 Oct 2010). Barak Sope noted in an interview with the Daily Post that in 1983 he had been instrumental in deporting a French ambassador for interference in government matters.
and suggested that the current ambassador should have raised the issue with the minister of foreign affairs (VDP, 4 Nov 2010). Probably in order to demonstrate his determination to proceed with Vanuatu’s claim and counter any impression that he was less than strong on the issue, Natapei announced that the government and the Malvatumauri would be staging a public march in support of Vanuatu’s claim over Matthew and Hunter, appealed to France to relinquish its claim, and noted that Vanuatu would be proceeding with its claim at the United Nations (VDP, 24 Nov, 29 Nov 2010).

Vanuatu’s relations with France are, of course, much more complicated than simply disputing the sovereignty of a couple of uninhabited islands. Nowadays the French government promotes the idea, and would like to believe, that France has become an accepted member of the larger Pacific community, having cast off its pariah status caused by the attack by French government agents in 1985 on the Greenpeace vessel, the *Rainbow Warrior* (which resulted in the death of a member of the crew); the massacre of nineteen pro-independence Kanaks on Ouvéa, New Caledonia, in 1988; and its program of nuclear testing in French Polynesia, which had only ceased in 1996. The French government’s long-term objective, which it has followed for almost fifty years, is to be able to remain permanently in the Pacific. Over the last two decades it has dispensed aid and assistance to Pacific Island countries (such as surveillance of fishing grounds and support during natural disasters), which must certainly be appreciated. It is obvious, however, that the aim of this policy is to mask France’s real strategy—professing to support independence but in reality simply refusing to adopt policies designed to give genuine recognition to the aspirations of the indigenous populations of their colonies. This is the strategy they followed unsuccessfully in the case of Vanuatu in the 1960s and 70s, which aimed to prevent independence and gave support to the secessionist rebellion against the democratically elected government of Father Walter Lini (Van Trease 1995, 3–58).

Of their three colonies—French Polynesia, Wallis/Futuna, and New Caledonia—the latter has been the most problematic for the French government. The Vanuatu government gave strong support to the Kanak independence movement, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak Socialiste (FLNKS) in the 1980s, and in 1986 the Vanuatu government sponsored New Caledonia for reinscription to the United Nations Committee of 24 on Decolonization. Vanuatu was also instrumental in getting agreement for the inclusion of the FLNKS as a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, founded in 1988. With the split in the Vanua’aku Pati in 1991 and the subsequent election of a Korman-led UMP government, relations between Vanuatu and France took a different turn. Korman reversed the former VP government’s unequivocal support for the FLNKS and obvious enmity toward France.

Francophones held power, under Maxime Carlot Korman or Serge Vohor, until 1998, and are often in coalition with anglophone parties as in 2010. Maintaining and
strengthening this political divide through targeted aid designed to strengthen Francophonie is a priority for the French government today to ensure that Vanuatu follows a more moderate public position with regard to continued French colonialism in the Pacific. For example, the French government has committed itself to supporting a new ump language policy proposed in 2009, under which all children from class 1 through 8 would be educated predominately in French; for the small percentage of students who go on to high school in subsequent years, English would be the medium of instruction for those who chose it (see Van Trease 2009, 475).

In early June 2010, Prime Minister Natape led a four-day fact-finding Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) mission to New Caledonia, at the request of the FLNKS, to assess the progress of the 1998 Noumea Accord and to determine ways that the MSG could assist. The report was to be tabled at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting scheduled to take place in Port Vila in August. The aim of the accord is to progressively transfer power to New Caledonian authorities until the territory decides, in a referendum to be held between 2014 and 2019, whether to remain within the French Republic or to become an independent state. The prime minister reported that the mission was concerned about the slow rate of progress in the implementation of the accord and, in particular, the continued existence of significant social and economic imbalances between the indigenous Kanak population and other groups—evidence that the genuine aspirations of the indigenous Kanak people are not being met (VPD, 4 June, 12 June 2010).

It is not clear exactly when the MSG report was discussed at the Forum, but it had obvious negative repercussions for the French. The governments of both New Caledonia and French Polynesia had requested that their participation at the Forum be upgraded from the level of associate status, that is, that they be able to take part in the leaders’ retreat, which is reserved for heads of state and government of the member countries. This was not agreed to and in the final Forum communiqué, with specific reference to New Caledonia, the point was made that the territory would have to “continue their dialogue with France in order to be able to satisfy the full membership” (PIF 2010). Given past history, it is relevant to contemplate what the position of the Vanuatu government would have been on the issue of New Caledonia at this time had the prime minister been a Francophone.

During 2010, the Opposition regularly accused the Natape government of being weak on issues relating to foreign affairs. In fact, what may have appeared at times to be hesitation or wavering could more appropriately be described simply as the practice of cautious diplomacy. Of all the political parties, the Vanua ‘aku Pati had the most knowledgeable and experienced team, headed by Joe Natuman, a university-educated minister of foreign affairs who had held various other portfolios, and Prime Minister Natape’s private secretary, Nikenike Vurobaravu, who holds a master’s degree in international affairs from the University of London and worked
for the Forum for a number of years during the 1990s.

The cautious nature of the government’s diplomacy became especially clear with regard to the West Papua issue, which flared up in early 2010, remained in the public debate until the end of the year, and significantly impacted the stability of the coalition government. In February, the Vanuatu Free West Papua Association (VFWPA) planned to hold a peaceful march in Port Vila to raise awareness of West Papua in anticipation of the meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group later in the year. The intention was to hold the march on Lini Day (a public holiday in commemoration of the country’s first prime minister) in recognition of Father Lini’s famous statement, “So long as any Pacific Islands remain colonized, none of us is free.” Since the Vanua’aku Pati had facilitated the founding of the VFWPA in the 1980s, it came as a surprise to many that the Natapa’i government refused to allow the march to go ahead. The headline in the Daily Post the next day read: “Government Takes U-turn over West Papua.” In response, a government official pointed out that since Vanuatu had formal diplomatic relations with Indonesia, it had in effect accepted Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua. Vanuatu had the right to express concerns about human rights violations and other issues, but questioning the sovereignty of West Papua would be interpreted as interfering in the internal affairs of Indonesia (VDP, 18 Feb, 25 Feb 2010).

But within a few days, the government reversed its decision and approved a march, which took place on Chief’s Day, 5 March 2010, when Minister of Foreign Affairs Joe Natuman accepted a petition from more than 200 West Papua sympathizers, including the president of the Malvatamauri, two former prime ministers, Opposition leader Ham Lini, and many community leaders who had links to the period of Vanuatu’s struggle for independence. The way in which the petition was presented was important. The marchers first presented the petition and a large pig to the president of the Malvatamauri, which he accepted. He then presented the petition and a different pig with full circular tusks to the minister of foreign affairs. The circular-tusked pig symbolized the high level of respect that the president of Malvatamauri was requesting from the government in its consideration of the petition. In a letter to the Daily Post, a representative of the Malvatamauri explained that “the petition was being presented with the value of custom attached to it requiring that it be honored, if accepted and subsequently received by the recipient, rather than the government receiving a piece of paper with demands” (VDP, 9 March 2010).

Minister Natuman noted in a short speech that Vanuatu would “never forget its history and where we have come from. And decolonization has and will be the cornerstone of our foreign policy.” He also made the point that Vanuatu still supported West Papua, despite having diplomatic relations with Indonesia, and made mention of the fact that it had not been under a Vanua’aku Pati–led government that diplomatic relations had been established but in the 1990s when the Union of Moderate
Parties had control of the government under the leadership of Maxime Carlot Korman and Serge Vohor (VDP, 6 March 2010). Rumors circulating two months later that the minister had been invited to talks in Jakarta elicited strong condemnation from the Opposition’s Ham Lini. He reminded the government of Vanuatu’s own colonial history and the support that the then New Hebrides had received, enabling the country to be enlisted with the UN Committee of 24 for Decolonization, which eventually led to independence (VDP, 4 May 2010).

By June it appeared that both government and opposition had agreed on a common policy. It was agreed that Prime Minister Natapei should lodge a motion with the UN secretary-general on behalf of Vanuatu for the inclusion of a debate on the status of West Papua on the agenda of the 2010 session of the General Assembly. A motion to this effect, known as the Wantok Blong Yumi Bill (Our Common Peoples’ Bill), was tabled in Parliament by independent MP Ralph Regenvanu, moved by the prime minister, seconded by the then Leader of the Opposition Maxime Carlot Korman, and passed unanimously. Included was an appeal for the General Assembly to ask the International Court of Justice to provide an advisory opinion on the process by which the Netherlands had ceded West Papua to Indonesia in 1962 and the conduct or effect of the 1969 Act of Free Choice (VDP, 21 June 2010).

On a visit to the United Kingdom, Regenvanu canvassed parliamentarians for support of the Vanuatu motion in the United Nations and reported that he had been received favorably (VDP, 5 July 2010). When the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the Pacific Islands Forum met in August, a group of six West Papuans traveled to Vanuatu to present requests in support of their cause (VDP, 4 Aug 2010). However, PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare objected to discussing West Papua at the Forum and it was eventually learned that the issue had not been included on the agenda (VDP, 6 Aug, 7 Aug 2010).

The effect was to undermine the position of the Natapei government. To the public, it appeared that the prime minister had not lobbied hard enough for the West Papua cause. When it was reported that Indonesia had donated new uniforms to Vanuatu for the police force and that the government had entertained a high-level Indonesian official, the political ramifications increased. A government member of Parliament, David Abel (and there may have been others) announced that he was having discussions with the Opposition about a possible change of sides (VDP, 9 Aug 2010). Foreign Minister Natuman achieved its goal with regard to the Forum because it needed full MSG support and that had not been forthcoming due to the position of Papua New Guinea (VDP, 11 Aug 2010).

Complicating the matter further was the government decision (which had not been communicated to the public beforehand) that the prime minister would not mention West Papua in his speech at the United Nations in October. Instead, Natapei urged UN members to address issues of colonialism, making a clear reference to the difficulty that Vanuatu was experienc-
ing with France over Matthew and Hunter (Maclellan 2010). Natapei’s failure to champion the West Papua cause was unforgivable and the reaction was explosive. The front-page headline in the Daily Post read: “Natapei Fails Promise in Parliament on W-Papua,” noting that he had not followed the mandate Parliament had given him in the Wantok Blong Yumi Bill to speak out for West Papuan decolonization (VDP, 15 Oct 2010).

Succumbing to diplomatic pressures and their view of what was possible given Vanuatu’s formal international commitments, Natapei and his government appeared to be weak.

The leader of the Opposition wrote to the Speaker requesting that Parliament be called on 25 October to debate a motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Natapei. Among the reasons given was the failure of the prime minister to follow Parliament’s motion to present the issue of West Papua to the United Nations (VDP, 15 Oct 2010). A few days later, amid claims by various members of Parliament that they felt they were being manipulated, with signatures being added and withdrawn from the motion, the Opposition found it did not have the numbers to proceed and so the attempt to unseat Natapei collapsed (VDP, 20 Oct 2010).

The third major diplomatic issue facing the Natapei government during 2010 was the problem of Fiji’s position in the Melanesian Spearhead Group. It had been four years since Commodore Frank Bainimarama led a coup that overthrew Fiji’s democratically elected government. Due to his unwillingness to commit to a return to democracy by scheduling new elections, the Pacific Islands Forum had suspended Fiji, but the MSG decided to continue to engage with Bainimarama, hoping that he could be convinced to compromise on his position. Despite several face-to-face meetings with the commander, Natapei, as MSG chairman during 2009 and 2010, failed to change Bainimarama’s mind. The looming problem for Natapei was that Vanuatu was due to hand over the MSG chairmanship to Fiji at a meeting in Suva in July. This meant that Natapei would have to hand over the leadership of the organization to an unelected leader, which Natapei felt obliged to take action to prevent, given that underlying the MSG is the fundamental principle of democracy, which all members are committed to practice. In view of the impasse with Bainimarama, Natapei consulted with the other MSG leaders (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and the FLNKS) and it was agreed (though there is some debate as to how united they were on the decision) that the Suva meeting should be postponed (VDP, 13 July 2010).

Bainimarama responded only hours after the announcement by accusing Natapei of bowing to the wishes of the Australians and by expelling the Australian ambassador in Suva, who he claimed was trying to persuade other regional diplomats in Fiji not to attend the MSG meeting. The Daily Post printed stories that the Australian government had been promising financial aid and other benefits to MSG members in an effort to achieve the postponement of the meeting (VDP, 14 July 2010). Leader of the Opposition Maxime Carlot Korman reacted strongly against Natapei’s decision in
an interview, saying that he could see no reason for the delay and that the result “has destroyed the trust and confidence that Fiji has had in Vanuatu’s neutral position in dealing with Fiji’s situation” (VDP, 17 July 2010).

The Vanuatu government’s position looked even weaker when, a week later, Bainimarama was able to convince the heads of government from Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu and the ambassadors or representatives of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Timor-Leste, and Tonga to attend an “Engaging Fiji” meeting in place of the postponed MSG leaders’ summit. Korman’s response was to call for Natapei to resign (VDP, 23 July 2010). The government did, however, receive positive acknowledgement for its stand from Transparency Vanuatu, which commended Natapei for “his courageous stand in upholding the core principles of democracy despite the mounting pressure from and within the region” (VDP, 6 Aug 2010). Subsequent events, however, would indicate that such principles are not widely held by many of Vanuatu’s political leaders, nor, it would seem, by many in the region.

While creating significant public debate among the small percentage of the public who read newspapers (something not to be overlooked generally when trying to understand or gauge Ni-Vanuatu views of political developments), the call for the government’s resignation received no support. Indeed, despite the earlier challenge to his leadership of the Vanua’aku Pati by Harry Iauko, Natapei had been able to hold the coalition (the VP, UMP, and the Alliance Group) together quite successfully, with the National United Party and the Vanuatu Republican Party in opposition. Nevertheless, the VP problem remained unresolved, and with Iauko in the Opposition and determined to topple the party leadership, it was certain that he would try to destabilize the coalition whenever an opportunity presented itself. Earlier, in May, a rumor had begun to circulate that a motion of no confidence was being considered among the backbenchers, but nothing came of it (VDP, 14 May 2010).

Likewise, in September, as the MSG issue began to fade, dissatisfaction within the Alliance Group regarding the division of portfolios was leading some members of Parliament to threaten to move to the Opposition. The problem appeared to be limited to the People’s Progressive Party (probably encouraged by Iauko), but Sato Kilman was reelected at the party congress and the disquiet subsided (VDP, 4 Sept, 9 Sept 2010). At the same time, one of the six Port Vila MPs who had affiliated with the Alliance Group, David Abel of the Shepherd Alliance, threatened to switch to the Opposition over the government’s handling of the West Papua issue (VDP, 8 Sept 2010). This was one of Iauko’s main criticisms as well, which prompted the Opposition, as noted earlier, to attempt a motion of no confidence in late October, though this also failed to get enough signatures.

In late October, in a sign of support for the government, UMP leader Serge Vohor issued a strong plea for members of Parliament to remain loyal to their parties and not be lured by the Opposition to destabilize the
current coalition. This was followed by a public announcement by VP, UMP, and Alliance ministers that the coalition continued to be solid (VDP, 19, 20, 21, 23 Oct 2010). However, by the end of November, Iauko sponsored yet another no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Natapei. All the leaders of the major parties were heavily involved in “Forgiveness Week” at the time and it appeared that the motion was just another attempt doomed to failure for lack of support. The reasons given for putting forward the motion included disapproval of the reduced budget tabled by the minister of finance, failure of the prime minister to raise the West Papua issue at the United Nations, and the decision of the prime minister to defer the MSG meeting (VDP, 27 Nov 2010).

The motion of no confidence was scheduled to be debated in Parliament on Thursday, 2 December. The prime minister appeared to be confident that his numbers were firm, as he decided that he would not attend the parliamentary session in order to take part in the Global Meeting on Climate Change in Mexico (VDP, 2 Dec 2010). Therefore, on the morning of the scheduled parliamentary session, Natapei was seen off at the airport by Sato Kilman, the deputy prime minister, along with two other Alliance ministers (Moana Carcasses and Paul Telukluk). It was reported that he asked Kilman if “everything was ok,” meaning whether the no-confidence motion was under control. Kilman confirmed that it was, they shook hands, and Natapei departed (VDP, 8 Dec 2010).

A few hours later, when Parliament met for its afternoon session, Speaker George Wells (a member of the Alliance Group) banned all media and the public from the chamber (VDP, 8 Dec 2010). Once the members had convened, Kilman led his Alliance Group to cross the floor to join the Opposition, boosting its numbers to 30 out of 52. When the no-confidence motion was put to a vote, it was passed with 30 votes in favor, 15 votes against, and 7 abstentions. The resulting new coalition consisted of the Alliance Group (including the PPP and other small parties and independents), NUP, and VRP. Sato Kilman (PPP and Alliance leader) was declared prime minister with Ham Lini (NUP) as his deputy. The thirteen ministerial portfolios were allocated as follows: 7 to the Alliance Group, 2 to NUP, 1 to VRP (plus the position of Speaker), and 3 to the Iauko faction of the VP (VDP, 3 Dec 2010). Significant was the allocation of the Ministry of Ni-Vanuatu Business Development to independent Port Vila MP and Alliance Group member Ralph Regenvanu—an indication of his growing influence within the Alliance Group and in politics generally.

A further reshuffle occurred two weeks later when dissatisfaction arose over the allocation of portfolios. The new Opposition, consisting of the Natapei faction of the Vanua’aku Pati (which was extremely angry over the way Natapei had been removed), the Union of Moderate Parties, and several independents, took the opportunity to try to topple Kilman. As is usual in Vanuatu politics, they were able to entice a few government members who were dissatisfied about the allocation of portfolios and other favors to sign the motion of no
confidence. New Speaker Maxime Carlot Korman, however, ruled that two of the signatures on the motion had been falsified and thus did not allow the motion to be debated. This allowed Kilman the opportunity to adjust the allocation of portfolios to strengthen his coalition with the Alliance Group giving up one portfolio to the VRP (VDP, 16 Dec 2010). In the meantime, the Opposition challenged the Speaker’s decision on the issue of signatures with the two members in question confirming that they had, indeed, signed the motion. The acting Speaker subsequently announced that the motion was in order with twenty-seven signatures and would be debated on 24 December (VDP, 17 Dec, 18 Dec 2010).

The final chapter in this classic Vanuatu political drama occurred on 20 December, a few days before the scheduled debate, when UMP President Serge Vohor deserted the Opposition and his VP “allies” to join the Kilman- led government. The UMP received two portfolios: Vohor was allocated public works (his former position in the Natapeti government) and Pentecost MP Charlot Salwai returned to his former ministry, education. As a result of the reshuffle, both the Alliance Group and the VRP gave up portfolios, with the effect of strengthening government numbers to the extent that they were no longer threatened by a vote of no confidence. True to form, Vohor pledged, as he had in 2009 when he joined the Natapeti government, that the “UMP will remain with the Government to the end of the term of this Government” (VDP, 21 Dec 2010).

Natapeti and his team had not seen what was coming, which is further evidence that the VP leaders seemed to have become somewhat disengaged from political realities. At least, they were clearly over-trusting of their coalition partners; otherwise, why would the prime minister have decided to travel out of the country—even to attend a meeting as representative for the Pacific Islands Forum—when his future was being debated? Not surprisingly, a few days after the change of government, the Daily Post printed an article from the Fiji Sun in which Commodore Bainimarama hailed the ousting of Natapeti. The article also reported that the word from Vanuatu was that Natapeti’s defeat was directly linked to his refusal to hand over the MSG chairmanship to Bainimarama (VDP, 7 Dec 2010).

There is little evidence, however, that serious disagreements had existed between the VP, UMP, and Alliance Group over the West Papua and the MSG chairmanship issues. Nevertheless, within a few days after taking office, Kilman and a delegation including the president of Malvatumauri, Chief Gratien Albuet, and several accompanying chiefs, flew to Honiara to attend the handing over of the MSG leadership. Their intention was to carry out a full traditional Vanuatu reconciliation ceremony between the leaders of Fiji and Vanuatu before the official meeting took place, which was to happen despite the fact that Bainimarama did not plan to attend the meeting himself (VDP, 14 Dec 2010).

Just where this alleged opposition to Natapeti’s position came from is not clear. Was Kilman in disagreement all along with his former coalition partner and head of government
Prime Minister Natapei? Where did MP Regenvanu stand? And, most puzzling, what was the true position of Serge Vohor and his UMP members? One explanation for the apparent lack of any sign of division between the coalition parties under Natapei prior to both votes of no confidence (a common pattern over the years) may simply reflect Vanuatu’s particular style of coalition politics. Cabinet members seem to have a free hand in formulating and implementing policies relating to their portfolios; there is a minimal obvious sense of collective responsibility for what takes place in government as a whole.

Likewise, because Ni-Vanuatu prefer not to confront each other openly when there is disagreement, it is difficult to determine if a policy has the support of the government as a whole or simply that of a single minister. Very seldom are disagreements between ministers in government reported to the public. Thus, during the West Papua and MSG debates, criticism of the government’s position (that is, Natapei’s position) came primarily from Opposition members and the public, not from members of the Alliance Group or the UMP. It seems logical to conclude, therefore, that when Kilman and the Alliance Group toppled the prime minister and then the UMP deserted the VP, they were driven less by disagreements over policies (though they may silently have had them) than by the desire to grab political power.

The question remains whether or not Natapei and his team succumbed to Australian pressure to block Bainimarama’s bid for the MSG chairmanship, or whether their decisions were based on an ongoing policy position that simply failed. Certainly, any accusation that the Natapei government had been persuaded to limit their engagement with Bainimarama appears to be an overstatement of the facts. Australian and Vanuatu foreign affairs personnel certainly discussed the MSG situation, but there is nothing to indicate that Vanuatu’s position was bought and paid for. Australian aid to Vanuatu has been significant and ongoing since independence in 1980. There was nothing about the grants and funded projects during 2010 to suggest that any unusual effort was being made to influence the decisions of Vanuatu’s leaders. Indeed, the newspapers in Vanuatu ran stories almost every week about new aid-funded projects by an array of donors including Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan, China, the European Union, and others.

Moreover, as noted earlier, Bainimarama came to Port Vila on several occasions for discussions, and the government persisted in its attempt to persuade the commander to alter his policy, despite local criticism in 2009, when it resisted pressure to support the sidelining of Bainimarama from the MSG as the Forum had done. In July, when he departed to attend the “Engaging Fiji” meeting (which was subsequently renamed “Engaging with the Pacific”), Foreign Minister Natuman explained that the Government of Vanuatu had raised its concern with Bainimarama about handing over the chairmanship to Fiji as early as 2009. The decision to postpone the MSG meeting was not in response to anything other than his refusal to deal with the issue of
restoring democracy in Fiji (VDP, 20 July 2010).

The Natapei government had its position vis-à-vis Bainimarama undermined by weak political leaders both at home and abroad who simply did not understand the nature of the Fiji situation. In Vanuatu there is a general lack of awareness of the implications of the coup in Fiji, despite editorials in the local press and articles by Transparency Vanuatu that regularly point out how the rule of law and democracy have been threatened. Indeed, there is a widespread belief that Bainimarama has been good for Fiji—sorting out corruption, the race issue, and, being an indigenous Fijian himself, looking after Fijian interests. In this regard, few appear to understand the significance of his suspension of the operation of Fiji’s Great Council of Chiefs or of his blocking of the annual meeting of the Methodist Church. Clearly, the leader of the Opposition’s comment that “it was his belief that the decision was taken in the interest of foreign countries” indicates a lack of understanding, or perhaps his desire simply to score political points by using tired arguments of outside interference directed mainly against the Australian government, accusations that regularly pepper the Vanuatu press (VDP, 23 July 2010). Likewise, Kilman’s rush to reconcile with Bainimarama after taking over from Natapei indicates a degree of support that he never expressed as Natapei’s deputy prime minister and perhaps even an affinity as an ex-chief of police with a fellow member of the uniformed services.

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