Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013
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Marshall Islands

The period under review in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) was focused largely on the impacts of climate change, both physical and political, as well as on preparations for hosting the 44th annual Pacific Islands Forum in Majuro in September 2013. Additionally, clear lines were drawn within the RMI national government, specifically in terms of government spending, as well as in the context of relations with the United States, which continued to be strained over the past twelve months largely due to tensions surrounding concerns about funding under the Compact of Free Association and a US Department of State report on human trafficking. One bright spot was the seeming progress toward a constitutional convention, which, while put on hold due to the upcoming Forum, appears likely to take place some time in 2014 and, unlike the climate-change situation, may give the Marshall Islands the opportunity to produce tangible results.

The topic of climate change was foremost on the minds of the RMI government, and especially Minister in Assistance to the President and Kwajalein Senator Tony de Brum, who has apparently made the issue the primary focus of his cabinet portfolio. At the United Nations climate meeting in Doha, Qatar, in December 2012, de Brum announced that the theme of the September 2013 Forum meeting was to be climate change, and specifically how the Pacific Island heads of state can take a greater leadership role on the issue globally (MII, 21 Dec 2012). De Brum followed this up with an appearance at an “Arria-formula” meeting of the UN Security Council on 15 February 2013. (Arria-formula meetings are not officially classified as meetings by the United Nations, and records or transcripts of the proceedings are not kept.) Despite the informal nature of the meeting, which was organized by the United Kingdom and Pakistan, de Brum’s speech was available on the Internet and a video report about the meeting was picked up by the online video magazine Slate V (2013). In the speech (and repeated in Slate’s report), de Brum arguably made a dubious connection between the drought in the northern atolls that had begun in January 2013 and the water company’s rationing schedule in Majuro, which was unaffected by the drought at the time of the speech. The minister then announced the drafting of a Majuro Declaration, which he said would call on all nations to commit, through their own actions, to limiting global warming to less than two degrees (de Brum 2013). The Marshall Islands will present the declaration for formal approval at the 2013 Forum.

The drought in the northern atolls did worsen, and in May RMI President Christopher Loeak’s cabinet declared it a disaster area, after which relief in the form of money and sup-
plies began to pour into the country. The Republic of China (Taiwan), Japan, and the Asian Development Bank each donated $100,000 to the relief efforts in May, as did Australia (which then sent another $385,000 in June). Most significant was the move by US President Barack Obama, who signed a disaster declaration on 14 June 2013, which was followed shortly thereafter by $1 million in rapid-response aid from the United Nations, announced by UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos, to be available by the end of the month. A few days later, RMI National Water Adviser Tom Vance described the situation in Enewetak and Utrik atolls as “dire” and reported that tensions among Islanders were rising. In response, the minister of foreign affairs and trade, Majuro Senator Phillip Muller called Vance’s comments “an overstatement” and suggested that the Marshall Islands was doing all it could to deliver relief to the northern atolls (PIR, 20 June 2013).

While rains returned to the northern atolls at the beginning of July, the total cost of the drought relief was estimated at $4.7 million, which ultimately cost the RMI government more than $900,000 after all international aid had been taken into account (MJJ, 21 June 2013). In a sign of things possibly to come for low-lying islands should climate change advance, on 25 June, as the drought in the northern atolls was in full swing, a series of high waves—compounded by exceptionally high tides and swells of six to eight feet from a local storm—flooded Majuro’s southern shore, washing completely across the road in some areas and knocking down a section of the seawall along the airport runway, leading to flight cancellations (Johnson 2013; MJJ, 28 June 2013).

Yet despite the sustained talk lamenting the very real effects of climate change, the RMI government pushed ahead with the $15.7 million airport runway expansion project funded by the US Federal Aviation Administration (USFAA), resulting in the continued dredging of healthy coral reefs in Majuro Lagoon. This action in turn decreases the dynamic natural capacity of the atoll to respond to rising sea levels. The project had been temporarily halted due to the efforts of Dr Dean Jacobson, a long-time marine science instructor at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), who had been waging a one-person campaign to halt the destruction of the healthy reefs. However, the RMI Environmental Protection Authority (RMIEPA) in mid-2012 approved an environmental impact assessment that allowed the dredging to continue and authorized the use of a two-hundred-ton crane (MJJ, 3 Aug 2012). At the end of August 2012, the USFAA approved the RMIEPA’s environmental impact assessment and use of the crane, and contractor Pacific International Inc (PII) resumed work on both dredge sites. On 31 August, RMIEPA Acting General Manager Lowell Alik filed a complaint with the national police, alleging that Jacobson had stormed into his office on that day and began swearing at him and claiming that Alik had lied on the environmental impact assessment. On 4 September, Pacific International Inc filed a similar complaint, alleging that the previous day Jacobson had taken CMI...
students on a snorkeling trip within the boundaries of one of the dredge sites and began swearing at PHI workers (MIJ, 7 Sept 2012). Although the students who were there denied that Jacobson had done anything improper and the complaint was set aside, pressure was put to bear on CM1 President Carl Hacker, who on 31 May 2013 in an open letter to the public finally dissociated himself and the college from any of Dr Jacobson’s actions advocating for the protection of the reef (MIJ, 31 May 2013). In late August 2013, Jacobson was informed that his contract would not be renewed beyond the 2013–2014 academic year. Meanwhile, the reef dredging continues, and delegates to the Pacific Islands Forum who arrive in Majuro to discuss the need to protect low-lying islands and atolls from the ravages of climate change and sea-level rise will, on their way into town, first drive by the crane dredging some of the last healthy coral from the lagoon.

Preparations for the September 2013 Forum, which is only the second PIF meeting hosted by the Marshalls, were well underway by mid-December, as New Zealand and Australia each provided US$200,000 in aid to assist with the hosting of the meeting (MIJ, 14 Dec 2012). In late January 2013, Aqua Hotels and Resorts was contracted to assist with renovations to the Marshall Islands Resort (which had originally been built in 1996 for the first Forum hosted by the Marshall Islands), but by the end of May Aqua Hotels had pulled out, alleging that terms of the contract had not been met by the RMI government (MIJ, 31 May 2013). There was some concern among the organizers within the government that the Marshalls would not have enough hotel rooms to meet the needs of the number of delegates and other visitors connected to the Forum, especially as the previous year’s meeting in the Cook Islands had been heavily attended, due in part to the appearance of then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. By the end of June, with the Forum budget projection at $2 million, the government had received from donors $800,000, as well as fifteen cars, almost all of which will become official RMI vehicles following the conclusion of the Forum (MIJ, 28 June 2013).

Considering Secretary Clinton’s participation in the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum in Rarotonga a new precedent for high-level talks with the United States at the meeting, the RMI government formally invited US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (MIJ, 29 March 2013). The United States, however, delayed confirming the attendance of any high-level cabinet members; in early August 2013, a frustrated Minister in Assistance de Brum gave an interview with Fox News while in Australia and stated that “if [Secretary of State Kerry] does not attend it would be a slap in the face and like the United States would be reversing its so-called pivot to the Pacific” (MIJ, 9 Aug 2013). Such rhetoric only seemed to increase in the run-up to the Forum meeting, and it is unclear how (or whether) the RMI government will react to the absence of Secretary Kerry, should he not attend.

Indeed, the relationship between the Marshall Islands and the United States seemed to have hit a rough patch
for most of the tenure of the Loeak administration, starting with the visit of US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell to Majuro in August 2012. Taking his cue from then Secretary of State Clinton’s attempt to “reset” relations with Russia in 2009 using a prop button, Minister Muller produced a similar contrivance with the word “Harmony” next to a panel with red and green buttons (MIJ, 10 Aug 2012).

Tensions flared again in late June 2013 with the release of the US Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report, which downgraded the Marshall Islands from “Tier 2” to “Tier 2 Watch List,” citing the Marshalls as “a destination country for women from East Asia subjected to sex trafficking” and noting the lack of implementation of any existing legislative safeguards to combat such practices (US Department of State 2013, 257). The downgrade to Tier 2 Watch List means that the Marshalls has two years to demonstrate that it is making significant progress in implementing and enforcing regulations to combat human trafficking; should it fail to do so, it will be downgraded further to Tier 3, at which point all non-compact-related funds from the United States could be taken away (MIJ, 26 July 2013). In response, Minister Muller responded quickly, if hastily, by denying any human trafficking within the Marshalls; his reasoning rested on the notions that Marshallese culture is matrilineal and that women are “the backbone of our society.” Muller also denied that there is prostitution in Majuro, claiming instead that “the ship captains and fishing masters bring their families in from their countries to visit with them” and concluding that the report was “totally baseless” (MIJ, 26 July 2013). Coupled with the prop reset button and Minister de Brum’s declaration that US Secretary of State John Kerry’s absence from the upcoming Pacific Islands Forum would be a “slap in the face,” the response to the Trafficking in Persons Report appears to demonstrate that there is much work for both sides to do in order to decrease the impassioned rhetoric coming out of the Loeak administration.

Adding to the tension between the Marshall Islands and the United States is the issue of compact funding, much of which was placed under enhanced scrutiny by the United States during the year. And while there was no official acknowledgment of the event or its significance, the period in review marked the halfway point of the current round of compact funding, with now less than ten years left on the clock. In December, the financial situation in terms of compact funds broke new ground, as the US Department of Interior requested the return of $26,224 in Supplemental Education Grant money from fiscal year 2010 that had been flagged during a previous audit. Additionally, the United States also questioned spending noted in a separate audit in the amount of $171,600 from fiscal year 2011, marking the first time that the United States has attempted to recover funds due to dubious spending on the part of the Marshall Islands (MIJ, 7 Dec 2012). These amounts quickly escalated, however, as the Ministry of Education had to return $74,726.37 in Supplemental Education Grant funds from fiscal year 2011, and it was reported that the Marshalls had...
not spent over $390,000 in compact funds during fiscal year 2012 (MIJ, 1 Feb 2013). By March 2013, it turned out that over the previous two fiscal years, the Marshalls had $1.2 million in unspent compact funds, monies that under normal circumstances would roll over into future fiscal years. However, the United States has put a hold on all unspent funds until the Marshall Islands is able to justify over $5.2 million in spending that is now under scrutiny from audits dating back to 2008 (MIJ, 29 March 2013).

A pair of questionable non-compact-related purchases by the government also left people scratching their heads. In early December 2012, Air Marshall Islands (AMI) Board Vice Chairperson and Ambassador-at-Large Kejjo Bien led a delegation to Nairobi, Kenya, to explore purchasing a 1986 Dornier for $1.4 million that the government thought could supplement the current AMI fleet of two planes (a Dornier and a Dash-8), both of which often are out of commission. At the same time as the trip to Nairobi, AMI was ordered by the RMI High Court to pay $1.4 million in late social security and health benefits payments (MIJ, 7 Dec 2012). Later that month the German engineer hired by AMI to inspect the Dornier gave it an excellent review, but by January 2013, Minister de Brum publicly stated that neither AMI nor the government had enough money to purchase the plane (MIJ, 18 Jan 2013). Two weeks later, Minister of Transportation and Communications and Jaluit Senator Rien Morris, under questioning from opposition senators, said that the government still had not made up its mind on the purchase of the plane, which Ailinglapalap Senator Ruben Zackhras pointed out had already been painted in AMI’s colors. Meanwhile, Jaluit Senator Alvin Jacklick reported to the Nitijela (the RMI legislature) that the plane’s certificate of airworthiness from the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority had expired on 18 January 2013 (MIJ, 1 Feb 2013). It was not until late June 2013, however, that the government revealed that an agreement of sale had been signed by Kejjo Bien and the owner of the Dornier during Bien’s initial trip to Nairobi on 5 December 2012 and that the sale was for the plane “as is where is” (MIJ, 28 June 2013). The following week, several cabinet ministers claimed that they had not known about the purchase in principle of the Dornier, and that a number of AMI board members had opposed the deal (MIJ, 5 July 2013). It is not clear at the time of this writing whether the Loeak administration will actually follow through with the purchase or whether it will be able to recoup its $10,000 deposit for the plane if it does not.

The other conspicuous purchase by the Loeak administration was Ann’s Palace, a three-story building across from the Marshall Islands Resort, which has stood empty for the better part of the past decade. Owned by Yong and Ann Ji, the building was offered for sale at $2.5 million, even though in 1999 the Ministry of Public Works had valued the property (then new) at between $861,000 and $961,000. The government purchase of the building for $1.5 million in late April 2013 was authorized by President Loeak in his capacity as acting minister of finance; he claimed that he had not seen the Ministry of Public
Works report prior to agreeing to the purchase price (MIJ, 10 May 2013). The government’s purchase of Ann’s Palace, coming in the middle of the disaster-relief efforts for the drought, was publicly criticized by Jaluit Senator Alvin Jacklick, who argued that the Loeak administration “has its priorities wrong.” In response, President Loeak suggested that the RMI government will need the extra office space afforded by Ann’s Palace for the ministries of education and finance and that “even without the building purchase, the government still couldn’t afford the cost” of the drought relief efforts (MIJ, 21 June 2013).

In a troubling sign of things to come, and in light of both the return of compact funds to the United States as well as the looming end of the current round of funding in 2023, the Marshall Islands suffered two embarrassing funding request denials from non-US donors. In 2012, Japan turned down a request from the RMI government to fund the construction of a campus for the University of the South Pacific center currently operating in Majuro; the Marshall Islands then asked Australia to fund the project, but in June 2013, Australia also denied the request (MIJ, 14 June 2013). Perhaps of more concern was the denial of the Marshall Islands’ request to have Japan restore the ECC, a facility built by the Japanese in 1997 that was given top priority in the RMI funding requests to Japan in late 2012 (MIJ, 14 Dec 2012). Originally called the Educational and Cultural Center, the ECC had functioned effectively as the national basketball arena until the summer of 2012 when termite damage resulted in a partial collapse of the building’s roof. While Japan had funded the replacement of the ECC floor in the mid-2000s, the funding request this time around was denied for two reasons: because the RMI government had missed the deadline to submit funding proposals, despite a Japanese assessment team’s report that was given to the RMI government shortly after the roof collapsed; and because the Marshall Islands had failed to budget for the gym’s maintenance since its construction (MIJ, 26 July 2013). It remains to be seen whether such funding requests will continue to be denied, and, if so, what that might mean in terms of donors placing further restrictions on aid in the future.

The period under review also saw the passing of a number of high-profile political and public figures. On 18 August 2012, Lijon Eknilang, a member of and longtime vocal advocate for the nuclear-affected community of Rongelap, passed away after an extended battle with nuclear testing–related cancer at the age of sixty-six. While living on Ailingnae as a young girl, she had been a witness to the Bravo Test on 1 March 1954, one of the original eighty-two Rongelapese to have been exposed to the massive fallout that resulted from that test. On 18 November 2012, Alik Alik died in Texas. Alik had served as a senator from Jaluit from 1991 to 1995, elected as a member of the Ralik-Ratak Democratic Party in opposition to then President Amata Kabua, and then as a member of the United Democratic Party, representing Majuro from 1999 until his retirement in late 2011. Alik also served as vice speaker of the Nitijela from 1999 to
2011, through the administrations of Kessai Note and Litokwa Tomeng and most of Jurelang Zedkaia’s administration. In early December, Botlong Loeak, a multiple-term judge on the Traditional Rights Court and brother of both President Christopher Loeak and Council of Iroij Chairman Kotak Loeak, passed away. In mid-April, original Nitijela member Abner Luckner, who served in various cabinet positions under President Amata Kabua, died in Majuro. On June 4, Beverly Chutaro unexpectedly passed away. She first came to the Marshall Islands from Ohio in 1968 as a teacher and shortly thereafter married Chuji Chutaro, a representative in the Congress of Micronesia who later served as a senator from Mili Atoll and who was a leading member of Ainiken ri-Majol (Voice of the Marshallese), the major opposition group that challenged Amata Kabua in the 1970s and 1980s. Two weeks later, Kaname Yamamura, the father of current Minister of Public Works and Utrik Senator Hiroshi Yamamura and father-in-law to Jabat Senator and former President Kessai Note, died at the age of ninety-three. Yamamura had been an ardent supporter of Ainiken ri-Majol, and was one of the primary nonelected proponents behind the opposition movement.

Perhaps the one bright spot in the period under review was the push, both from within the government and from the community at large, for a Constitutional Convention (Con-Con). Under Article XII, Section 6, of the RMI Constitution, the Nitijela is required to “report on the advisability of amending” the Constitution at least once every ten years, and it is the responsibility of the Speaker’s office to initiate such a report on a potential Con-Con and referendum. Considering that there have been two Con-Con to amend the Constitution since the founding of the republic in 1979, in 1990 and 1995, many in the Marshalls felt that this process was long overdue. Indeed, the Constitution has only been amended twice, to clarify the official name of the Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and to verify that the Marshallese-language version of the document supersedes the English version in cases of dispute. The moves made by the current Speaker, Likiep Senator Donald Capelle, have so far been the most promising in at least a decade, and there is widespread consensus that one of the major issues that such a Con-Con and referendum should address is that of the direct election of the president (MIJ, 17 May 2013). Since the RMI system of government is based on a Westminster parliamentary model, the president currently needs only 17 votes (including her or his own) to secure a majority from the 33-member chamber.

The first public hearings held by the Speaker’s appointed nine-member committee, chaired by Helkena Anni, on the subject of the Con-Con began on 15 April 2013, and suggestions for amendments from those in attendance included the creation of the positions of an independent special prosecutor and an ombudsman (MIJ, 19 April 2013). By May, a number of additional public hearings were convened, and while Anni was quoted as saying “The most popular proposal is for direct election of the President,” another suggested amendment that
was promoted by various women’s groups and was gaining traction among the general public by the end of the period under review was the reservation of five seats in the Nitijela to be held by women (MIJ, 10 May 2013).

While there is some hope that positive change may come from a potential Con-Con, there is also concern that the results from a popular referendum may yield little more than pro-forma amendments, as happened during the previous two Con-Cons. As the Marshall Islands, and Majuro in particular, narrows its focus on the politics and logistics of hosting the Pacific Islands Forum in September 2013, there has yet to emerge any sort of direction as to where the country is heading as it moves into the second half of the current (and possibly final) round of compact funding. Climate change is indeed a threat to the islands, but its effects might not be felt as dramatically or as immediately as the socio-economic impacts that may result if certain decisions regarding a post-2023 Marshall Islands are continually put off until tomorrow.

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References


