Political Reviews

_Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events,
1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017_

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member (TI, 26 Aug 2016); Joseph Ah-Scha, assembly member from the Marquesas Islands (TI, 25 Jan 2017); and Pori Chan, delegate mayor of Kaukura Atoll in the Tuamotus (TI, 1 May 2017). Finally, the country also mourned two important cultural figures, local music producer Alphonse Vanfau (TI, 28 June 2016) and Wilfrid Pinau Lucas, one of the promoters of the Tahitian cultural renaissance during the end of last century (TI, 31 Jan 2017).

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HAWAI‘I

The year under review in Hawai‘i saw the traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a and its accompanying vessel Hikianalia return to O‘ahu on 17 June 2017 after a three-year, forty-thousand-mile, worldwide voyage dubbed “Mālama Honua” (Care for the Earth). The voyage circumnavigated the Earth using only traditional Polynesian navigation techniques,
reaching 150 ports in twenty-three countries and territories (PVS 2017). Captain Ka‘iulani Murphy stated, “We really are sailing in their (the ancestors’) wake...we had to relearn what our ancestors had mastered” (Civil Beat 2017). Originally trained by Satawal’s Mau Piailug, Polynesian Voyaging Society President Nainoa Thompson noted that traditional Pacific Islanders “figured it out—how to live well on these islands...that is the challenge of the time for planet earth and all of humanity.” Thompson used the attention on Hōkūle‘a’s return to urge Hawai‘i to become a leader on sustainability (Caron 2017).

Just as Hōkūle‘a was returning from her voyage, Hawai‘i Governor David Ige affirmed the state’s commitment to the Paris Climate Accords, signing two bills aimed at reducing greenhouse gases in a manner consistent with the Paris agreement. This was one of Hawai‘i’s perceived acts of defiance toward President Donald Trump, who pulled the United States out of the accords. One news outlet reported: “Mr. Ige, a Democrat in his first term as governor, said in remarks before the signing: ‘We are the testing grounds—as an island state, we are especially aware of the limits of our natural environment’” (Bromwich 2017).

Hawai‘i lost celebrated musicians Palani Vaughan, Eddie Kamae, and Ernie Cruz Jr during the period under review. Vaughan was a well-known scholar of King David Kalākaua (who reigned 1874–1891) and in the 1970s and 1980s he revived interest in the monarch’s period with a four-album series devoted to Kalākaua (KHON2 2016). Kamae’s passing was even noted by the New York Times, which called him an “innovator and a historian on four strings”; “Mr. Kamae was one of the most influential Hawaiian musicians of the second half of the 20th century, at once an innovator and a diligent steward of folkloric customs. He is best remembered as a founder of the group the Sons of Hawaii, which made a handful of widely emulated albums in the 1960s and ’70s that set the terms for the revivalist movement known as the Hawaiian renaissance” (Chinen 2017). Cruz was a longtime member of the popular music group Ka‘au Crater Boys, and his younger brother, Guy Cruz, also a noted singer, died just a few days after him (Kake-sako and Berger 2016).

Politically, Hawai‘i was at the forefront of opposition to newly elected US President Donald Trump’s Muslim travel ban, which sought to prohibit travel to the United States from seven predominantly Muslim countries. After Hawai‘i Attorney General Douglas Chin filed a motion challenging the ban, US District Judge Derrick Kahala Watson ruled on 15 March 2017 that “the Government’s narrowly defined list [of types of family members allowed to travel] finds no support in the careful language of the Supreme Court or even in the immigration statutes on which the Government relies” (State of Hawai‘i 2017). Trump-appointed Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated publically his disbelief that “a judge sitting on an island in the Pacific” could deter a decision of the US president (Savage 2017). As a result of his decision, Watson received threatening messages and was put under twenty-four-hour protection by the US Marshall Service,
which protects federal judicial officials (Silva 2017).

On 7 July 2017, Judge Watson ruled against Hawai’i’s challenge to the revised ban, claiming that only the US Supreme Court had the authority to rule on the case (Somin 2017a), but a week later he issued an injunction against key parts of the travel ban executive order (Somin 2017b). At issue was the definition of “close relatives,” and whether grandparents met the qualification for exemptions to the travel ban. In his 14 July ruling, Watson held that grandparents were “the epitome” of close relatives.

In some quarters, it is thought that the fate of Native Hawaiians’ claims to political sovereignty lies in the international arena. To this purpose, proceedings were initiated in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, Netherlands, for the case Larsen v Hawaiian Kingdom. This continuation of the Larsen case is in the form of a fact-finding International Commission of Inquiry. The initial case stems from 2001. The underlying basis of the case is the continued existence of Hawai’i as an independent state. This is based on the fact that Hawai’i was annexed to the United States in 1898, allegedly, through a Joint Resolution of Congress, rather than a treaty. As a unilateral and domestic action, the resolution, it is argued, cannot be used to acquire foreign territory. The new International Inquiry lends credence to this argument, and the fact-finding format does not require the participation of the United States, a factor that had led to the inconclusive result of the original Larsen case in 2001 (Hawaiian Kingdom blog 2015).

The 2001 case was cited in the high-profile PCA case Philippines v China regarding the South China Sea, and the citing of the 2001 case lends support to the emerging discourse of Hawai’i as an independent state (Hawaii Kingdom blog 2016). Federico Lenzerini, professor of international law at the University of Siena, Italy, is the counsel for the Hawaiian Kingdom and Dr David Keanu Sai is the kingdom’s agent. Lance Larsen is represented by attorney Dexter Ka’iama. Professor Francesco Francioni of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, is the appointing authority, tasked with forming the International Commission of Inquiry for the case. According to the Hawaiian Kingdom blog (2017): “The PCA accepted the case as a dispute between a state and a private party, and acknowledged the Hawaiian Kingdom as a non-Contracting Power under Article 47 of the 1907 Hague Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes.”

In the realm of cultural politics, advocates and opponents of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) on Mauna Kea, Hawai’i Island, experienced both victories and setbacks as the courts stalled construction. As Hawaii News Now pointed out, the Mauna Kea movement “has spread far beyond the slopes of Mauna Kea. Rallies are now springing up around Hawaii, the mainland and around the world . . . from Oregon to Kentucky, New Mexico, North Dakota, Georgia and Massachusetts. There are even pictures and rallies from Korea, New Zealand, England and Germany” (Gutierrez 2015). Meanwhile, two prominent Hawaiian leaders, includ-
ing Office of Hawaiian Affairs trustee Peter Apo, claimed to represent a “silent majority” of Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Native Hawaiians) who support TMT (Richardson 2017). The telescope issue also affected the island of Maui as opponents of a solar telescope there unsuccessfully attempted to block access to the summit of Haleakalā (Hawaii News Now 2017).

Underlying many of these struggles was the question of the political status of Native Hawaiians. Still mourning the passing of movement leader Dr Kekuni Blaisdell in early 2016, the Hawaiian sovereignty movement evaluated its prospects immediately after the election of Donald Trump. On 10 November 2016, a Community Forum on the Future of the Hawaiian Nation was held in Honolulu to discuss the prospects for Hawaiian self-governance. The forum took the form of a debate between supporters of recognition by the US federal government and advocates of independence, and it became quite heated as federal recognition supporters accused others of personal attacks over the previous few years. The federal recognition position was represented by attorney Mililani Trask as well as Michelle Kauhane and Robin Danner, both formerly of the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement. Independence supporters, represented by Mauna Kea activist Kaho’okahi Kanuha, Dr Kalamaoka’a‘ina Niheu, and Dr Kū Kahakalau, questioned whether federal recognition was at all feasible under President Trump, given that it was to be achieved by executive order. Robin Danner responded that the path had been created and remained open for recognition (ostensibly by a future administration) (Blair 2016).

In what has become an annual observance, Hawaiians celebrated the Hawaiian Kingdom holiday Lā Ho‘iho‘i Ea, Hawaiian Restoration Day, which commemorates the return of Hawaiian independence from Britain after a five-month takeover in 1843. The 2016 observance was held in downtown Honolulu at Thomas Square—named for Admiral Richardson Thomas, who restored Hawaiian sovereignty—before the City and County of Honolulu closed the park for renovations and transfer to the Department of Enterprise Services. Renovations will include installing a statue of King Kamehameha III, who famously proclaimed on 31 July 1843, “Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono” (The sovereignty of the land is perpetuated in righteousness), which became the motto of the Hawaiian Kingdom and later the state motto.

Electorally, the Democratic Party continued and further entrenched its dominance of the Hawai‘i political scene. Some credit (others blame) the pro-rail, pro-Democrat Pacific Resources Partnership (PRP)—which describes itself as “the backbone of Hawaii’s construction industry,” and as representing “the Hawaii Regional Council of Carpenters . . . and over 240 diverse contractors”—for this dominance (PRP [2017]). The group established a SuperPAC (Political Action Committee), which allows for the bundling of campaign donations of much larger amounts than previously allowed. In December 2016, Pacific Resources Partnership was fined for failing to disclose its campaign spending (Pang 2016). The results of the
2016 elections had only three Republicans victorious in Hawai‘i’s seventy-six-member legislature. Similarly, Democrats Brian Schatz (US Senate) and Mazie Hirono (US House) won 70 percent and 68 percent, respectively, of Hawai‘i votes. In the presidential race, 61 percent of Hawai‘i voters chose Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton over Republican Donald Trump, who received 29 percent of Hawai‘i votes (State of Hawai‘i 2016).

In a close but stunning upset, Keli‘i Akina defeated long-standing trustee of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) Haunani Apoliona. While Akina’s campaign slogan was “Uniting Hawai‘i,” many viewed his candidacy as divisive, as he opposes both full independence and US federal government recognition of Native Hawaiians. Akina is director of the Grassroot Institute, which in late 2015 had successfully prevented the certification of the results of an election for delegates to a constitutional convention seeking federal recognition. On the Grassroot Institute’s appeal of lower court decisions allowing the delegate election to proceed, the US Supreme Court enjoined the counting of the ballots (Hawaii Free Press 2015). Another candidate nearly succeeded in ousting the former chair of OHA; longtime sovereignty activist Mililani Trask was narrowly defeated by then-chairperson Robert Lindsey for the Hawai‘i Island seat on the nine-member OHA board of trustees.

Debate continued over the half-completed, beleaguered US$10 billion rail project on the island of O‘ahu. Additional funding was needed for the controversial project connecting the “second city” of Kapolei with downtown Honolulu. A special session of the Hawai‘i State Legislature was set for 14 August to discuss rail funding (Hawaii Independent 2017a). Proposals floated earlier in the year included raising the hotel room tax from 9.25 percent to 12 percent for ten years and diverting some of the neighbor islands’ share of that tax, even though the rail system will only benefit the south and west shores of O‘ahu (Dayton 2017).

Due to the bellicose rhetoric of President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Hawai‘i civil authorities crafted plans in preparation for a nuclear strike from North Korea, including at one point even renovating Cold War-era bunkers (later determined to be useless [Morales 2017]; see also Hauser 2017). The Hawaii Independent news website ran an editorial critiquing this response: “President Trump recently responded to North Korean aggression by boasting that the Kim regime didn’t have weapons that could reach the U.S. mainland. After the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea failed to launch a missile on April 15, the ‘Day of the Sun,’ the LA Times and Washington Post repeated Trump’s retort, reassuring Americans that North Korea could not reach the U.S. mainland and, in so doing, crassly implied that threatened strikes on Hawai‘i were of no concern. The reaction here in Hawai‘i has been [not unlike] that of a battered spouse: Hawai‘i state representatives have convened a panel to reactivate Cold War nuclear shelters. One that was listed as being capable of housing 14,000 was not a bunker at all, but a parking structure. Rather than addressing the real problem—U.S. militarism in Hawai‘i,
which puts us all in harm’s way—our ‘leaders’ seek the protection of their battering spouse (protection that consists, at present, of a very unreliable missile defense system)” (Hawaii Independent 2017b).

Hawai’i experienced both population and economic growth in 2016. Hawai’i’s population increased very slightly to 1.43 million, and the state’s gross domestic product (GDP) rose to $83 billion in 2016, up from $80 billion in 2015. The per-capita GDP rose from $56,554 in 2015 to $58,742 in 2016 (DBET 2016). Much of this growth was tourism and construction-driven. Though hotels (accommodation) and construction each represented only $4 billion of the GDP, they were some of the largest single sectors and suggest a fairly diverse economy. Development continued in the Kaka’ako region of Honolulu, with construction and plans for more than twenty high-rise residential towers. Although stretching back decades, plans for workforce housing were mainly supplanted by luxury condo development, with single units selling near, or in many cases, over $1 million, and as high as $36 million (Bruner 2016).

On Kaua’i, Facebook founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mark Zuckerberg drew the ire of Native Hawaiians when he filed multiple “quiet title” claims against hundreds of Hawaiian landowners whose ownership claims stretch back to the origin of private property rights in 1850. During the period of the privatization of land in Hawai’i (1840–1855), kuleana (usually translated as “native tenant rights”) constituted both a right to, and responsibility over, land for Hawaiians. The 1850 Kuleana Act provided a means for maka’āinana (commoners) to divide out these rights and gain a fee-simple title to the lands under their cultivation. Zuckerberg dropped his claims after protest and media scrutiny. According to Julia Carrie Wong of London’s Guardian newspaper, the “Facebook CEO wrote that he did not understand [the] history of [the] ‘quiet title’ process, which many native Hawaiians consider a tool to dispossess them of ‘sacred’ lands” (Wong 2017).

Homelessness (called “houselessness” by some [see, eg, Terrell 2016]) continued to be a problem as the median house price on O‘ahu hit $795,000 in mid-2017, an all-time high (Segal 2017). A recent study found that Native Hawaiians are disproportionately represented in the state’s homeless population (HUD 2017). Plans to address the issue included a “pu‘uhonua” (refuge) development in Kahauiki, near the Daniel K Inouye International Airport.

Some of the economic changes are related to the long-term transition from sugar to a diversified, tourism- and construction-driven economy. Hawai’i’s very last sugar plantation, at Pu‘unēnē in Central Maui, closed at the end of 2016. Sugar was first produced commercially in the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1835 and became the dominant industry for nearly a century and a half before beginning a slow decline. According to Robert Osgood of the Hawai‘i Agricultural Research Center, “Hawaii produced over a million tons of sugar per year for over 50 years. At one time that was 20 percent of all the sugar that was consumed in the United States” (Honolulu
The plantation’s owner, Alexander & Baldwin (a so-called “Big Five” company, part of a small group of economically dominant firms in Hawai‘i), plans to use its lands for diversified agriculture.

On 15 July 2016, the Public Utility Commission voted to reject a proposed deal in which Florida-based NextEra Energy would have purchased Hawaiian Electric Industries (HEI) for $4.3 billion (Honolulu Star-Advertiser 2016). HEI provides electricity to 95 percent of Hawai‘i residents through its subsidiaries Hawaiian Electric Company, Maui Electric Company, and Hawaiian Electric Light Company on Hawai‘i Island; it also owns American Savings Bank. HEI, along with the State of Hawai‘i, set a goal of reaching 100 percent renewable energy by 2045.

Hawai‘i’s high cost of living drew attention in 2016. In April 2014, the Hawai‘i State Legislature passed a bill that would gradually raise the minimum wage from $7.75 in 2015 to $10.10 by 2018 (Hawaii News Now 2014). The March 2016 issue of Hawaii Business featured a story comparing how three people who each made significantly less than the average annual income of $51,000 (according to the 2010 census) were coping, using different strategies and making daily sacrifices in order to make ends meet. One mother who lives with her parents on Hawai‘i Island described the kinds of sacrifices that many families are making: “They want to see a movie. Or go to McDonald’s. Once in a while we’ll go bowling, but that’s a luxury. My daughter now wants her own room. She’s a freshman in high school, and she deserves it. I feel bad for her because she should have her own space. But I just can’t afford it. I have to say no to my kids all of the time” (Yu 2016).

‘UMI PERKINS

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Political Reviews • Polynesia


Another kapa haka exponent, orator, musician, and gifted saxophonist, the Reverend Te Napi Tūtewehiwehi Waaka, passed away in November. He was Tainui and Ngāti Pikiao and was well known for his charismatic charm and his ability to send crowds into fits of laughter (Māori Television 2016b).

Within a fortnight, his relation Mita Mohi of Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Rangiwewehi, and Ngāti Tūwharetoa also left us. As an exponent of the art of mau rākau (Māori weaponry), he had set up programs to train young men, including thousands who were at risk, in traditional weaponry skills (Makiha 2016).

The loss of Awanuiārangi Black at the age of forty-eight soon after was keenly felt. A leader of Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Pukenga, and Ngāti Raukawa ki Ōtaki, he served on a number of bodies including the National Iwi Chairs Forum, the Bay of Plenty Regional Council, and Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo (the Māori Language Commission). He also led the campaign for formal commemorations of the British invasion of Tauranga Moana in the 1860s (Cairns and others 2016). A fortnight later, singer Bunny Te Kōkiri Miha Waaherterers (Ngāi Te Rangi) passed away. He recorded a number of hits in the 1970s (Māori Television 2016a).

In January 2017, it was Ngāpuhi’s Iwi Puihi (Percy) Tīpene, founding member and chairperson of Waka Kai Ora (Māori Organics Aotearoa). Percy had extensive knowledge of primary industries, having been a government auditor, advisor, and technician. He combined this experience with a deep knowledge of tikanga (Māori law) to establish the world’s first indigenous...