

## VANUATU

Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman successfully maintained his coalition government in office through the year, completing his four-year term. They went to the polls as scheduled in November for Vanuatu's fourth general election since independence.

The prospect of general elections increasingly infected government business with undisguised electioneering, and much of the year's political activity was dominated by preparations for the poll. Although Prime Minister Korman demonstrated that coalition government could be made to work and complete a full term in office, the instability within government and, as the year progressed, within Korman's own ruling Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) itself, became more and more obvious as individuals and parties prepared for the contest. Although often a quiet period in public life, the new year early presented a number of issues and events that continued to reverberate through the year.

On 1 January the government introduced a new 4 percent turnover tax, recommended by an Australian-funded review of government revenues, which led to price rises as businesses passed on the increases to consumers. Public anger at the increase in prices was identified by some UMP members of parliament and party officials as contributing to its failure to win an outright majority in the Luganville Municipal elections held on 31 January. The major anglophone parties, Unity Front (UF) and Father Lini's National United Party (NUP), although each won only four seats compared to

UMP's five, agreed to form a coalition administration. Under the agreement, NUP appointed Marilyn Aranhapat as mayor, the first woman to hold such an office in Vanuatu. Once in office, the new administration moved quickly to sack all council employees and replace them with NUP supporters, a measure later announced to be NUP policy if returned to national government at the general elections. This collaboration between UF and NUP immediately excited speculation that the former anglophone partners might combine to oust the UMP from government at year's end, despite continuing personal animosities between some of the leaders on both sides.

In parallel shadow plays, deputy prime minister and minor coalition party leader Sethy Regenvanu was forced to repudiate public reports that his People's Democratic Party (PDP) would withdraw support from the government over the large-scale sacking of striking public servants. The UMP's Alick Noel, reelected during the month as mayor of Port Vila, later in the year precipitated a serious internal dispute in the party and litigation over endorsement of his candidacy in the national elections.

Divisions and defections were recurrent motifs in Vanuatu's political life as all parties readied themselves for the general elections. Successive party congresses, to adopt policy platforms and confirm party candidates, began as early as January, when sixty members attended PDP's first congress. Three of its four members of parliament were ministers, which underlined how disproportionate representation had become in the coalition's somewhat

shaky retention of power. As if to conform to fragmenting tendencies, the PDP Congress expelled from its ranks a number of its more prominent former Vanua'aku Party and former NUP ministerial colleagues.

As political tensions proliferated, the operations of the media came under increasingly intensive government supervision. In February, Radio Vanuatu was banned from airing an interview with the opposition Unity Front's leader Donald Kalpokas, and Father Gerard Leymang, first secretary to the prime minister, threatened to revoke the residency permit of the editor of Vanuatu's independent weekly, *Trading Post*, if it did not include French-language items in its coverage—a threat made more worrying by expulsion letters issued the previous month to three expatriate businessmen—raising again the latent fear of a revival of arbitrary expulsions.

Pressure on *Trading Post* increased in March, when Finance Minister Willy Jimmy expressed a willingness to reconsider the issue of its business license if it published material attacking the government, or containing inaccurate and misleading information, especially touching the personal and private lives of leading figures. In June, freedom of the press was again at issue and the Vanuatu government warned Radio New Zealand International over its reporting of the resignations of two Australian judges from the Vanuatu judiciary, alleging unprofessional conduct by the country's chief justice. Radio Vanuatu was banned from covering the issue.

Press freedom continued to be an issue of public policy, and in October

the prime minister intervened directly to overturn a deportation order against the editor of *Trading Post*. While publicly reaffirming the importance of freedom of the press, he admonished the media that in the exercise of that freedom they should not damage the social stability of the nation and should understand that small island societies could not accept the same (low) standards prevailing in some international capitals.

The first sitting of parliament, in March, was opened by President Jean-Marie L  y   Lenelcan, who castigated the government's tax changes and resultant price increases, as well as falling expenditure on basic services to the people, particularly health and education, and exhorted members of parliament to spend more time (and more of their discretionary development funds) in their electorates.

The session passed a number of bills, including one to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, for the registration of freehold title under the Land Leases Act, and a bill to create a Chamber of Commerce, with six regional offices, to promote foreign investment and the development of ni-Vanuatu private enterprise.

With the Beijing International Women's Conference on the horizon, the Melanesian Women's Caucus met in late April to draft a Pacific Platform for the conference. Minister for Justice, Culture and Women's Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Regenvanu, having led the Vanuatu delegation to the Beijing Conference, followed up on return by establishing a steering com-

mittee to examine Beijing's Global Plan of Action, work out a common plan of action for the advancement of women, set priorities for a ten-year plan 1996–2005, and submit a report by the end of November.

Sustained perhaps by the momentum of these events focusing on the status and role of women, and disgruntled with their party's failure to nominate any women candidates for the general election, six prominent women announced in October their intention to run under the banner of "Women in Politics." The decision to run in spite of Vanua'aku Party remonstrations led prominent VP stalwart and leading women's activist Grace Mera Molisa to resign from the party, saying there would never be a right time for women in Vanuatu.

Despite pressure from international logging interests, there was some progress toward a better-regulated system for the development of the sensitive forestry sector. A weak bureaucracy and the temptation, in an election year, to reap benefits from the issue of licenses resulted in permits to harvest well beyond sustainable yields. Confusion over permits, involving competing claims by logging companies and disputes among local landowners, and restricted by an export ban on round logs, combined, however, to restrict extraction to rates well below those granted under licenses.

The commencement of a major aid-funded forestry project to monitor the industry and develop plans for a sustainable forestry sector, complementing an earlier forest inventory project, began to boost government efforts to

prevent uncontrolled extraction. Local landowners themselves also showed a will to resist unauthorized or unacceptable logging practices, and on Santo took direct action against Malaysia's Santo Veneers Company by burning a bulldozer.

At the national level, a national code of logging practice was worked out and adopted, incorporating core elements of the regional code of practice being developed through the South Pacific Forum. In April, 3000 hectares of ancient kauri and other species unique to Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Santa Cruz Islands, were set aside in a reserve through a lease agreement reached between the Department of Forestry and traditional landowners on Erromango. The agreement is for compensation to be paid to landowners for not logging.

France's decision to resume nuclear testing in French Polynesia severely tested Prime Minister Carlot Korman's solidarity with other regional governments in condemnation of the test series, as well as his support for France and its role and interests in the Pacific. His reaction to the first test, and the wave of protest it occasioned throughout the island countries, was to defend France's sovereign decision and to add that other states had no right to interfere so long as their own environments were not affected. However, Vanuatu joined the regional action committee and attended the meeting of South Pacific environment ministers to consider regional reactions to the test series. Vanuatu also ultimately went along with the statement issued by Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, in his capacity as chairman of the

South Pacific Forum, deploring French actions and contempt for Pacific opinion, an action that UMP President Serge Vohor indicated was not in line with party policy.

In August, Vanuatu hosted the meeting of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which issued the Lakatoro Declaration proposing "Oceania Cooperation for Denuclearisation in the Southwest Pacific," and calling for dialogue with France on progress toward denuclearization. Australia and New Zealand were left out of the proposed grouping, perhaps as a veiled rebuke for being too active and strident in condemnation of French testing. Vanuatu also announced a decision to sign the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty at the Madang Forum meeting in August, and acceded to the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. A month later it submitted its application to join the World Trade Organization.

In what would persist as an intensifying struggle for power in the ruling Union of Moderate Parties as the date for elections approached, the prime minister in April sacked a number of political secretaries, including his nephew Alfred Carlot, who had publicly challenged the automatic endorsement of some sitting members of parliament, arguing that they were too old for office and had become corrupt. This challenge to the older politicians on behalf of a group of younger aspirants for power was echoed by UMP President Vohor on a number of occasions during the months of wrangling needed to settle the UMP candidate list for the general elections. At its congress in May, Vohor supported the

challenge to some preselections and condemned the government as without principle and "headed for dictatorship," remarks directed at Prime Minister Korman.

In the same month, the Vanua'aku Party, Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP), Tan Union (TU), and a splinter Nagriamel party (Nakato Stevens), agreed to coordinate their electoral slates and stand candidates under the single banner of Unity Front, one that had united them as the parliamentary opposition.

In July, the UMP Port Vila subcommittee confirmed the candidacies of Carlot Korman, Finance Minister Willy Jimmy, and Kepu Manwo, and declared that there would be no independent UMP candidates at the elections, a decision that foreshadowed the expulsion of the young pretenders from the Union of Moderate Parties in September. Subsequently, they formed an Independent Front, led by Patrick Crowby, which not only would compete for UMP votes but began to campaign actively against their former party. At the UMP Congress on Epi in September, which endorsed 32 candidates, inclusive of Nagriamel and Fren Melanesie Party, Vohor was reported to have commanded sufficient numbers to exclude both Carlot Korman and Willy Jimmy, and a deal had to be put together to allow their inclusion in the final list.

In October, the findings of the Electoral Disputes Committee appointed by the chief justice upheld complaints of voting irregularities in the provincial elections in Sanma and Tafea and declared them null and void. At the end of the month, the Union of Moder-

ate Parties' continued divisions over endorsement of candidates for the elections were adjudicated by the Supreme Court, following the submission to the Electoral Commission of differing name-lists by both the executive of the party and the prime minister. The court found in favor of a list approved by the earlier UMP Congress in September, which had the effect of excluding high-profile and popular Port Vila Mayor Alick Noel. He decided to run as an independent, competing directly against Willy Jimmy, whose reputation was impugned on the eve of the election in the first report issued by Vanuatu's newly appointed ombudsman. The report found that both the finance and home affairs ministers had breached the leadership code through irregularities in the licensing of a 24-hour bottleshop, and that Jimmy had failed to disclose a personal business interest in it. The report also regretted that the prime minister, who seemed to have been aware of the problems, had done nothing to discipline his ministers.

The general elections were held on 30 November, with a record number of 170 candidates, 12 political parties, and 19 independents officially contesting the ballot in fifteen constituencies. These numbers confirmed a growing divisiveness in Vanuatu's once stable party-based politics, and seem to promise more temporary alliances of convergent self-interest as the basis for future government in Vanuatu—characteristics common in other parts of Melanesia, but detrimental to policy coherence and good governance.

In the event, and as expected, no

party obtained a majority in its own right, thus entrenching the trend toward coalition government. The former opposition Unity Front won 20 of the 50 seats, outperforming its major rivals, UMP and NUP, both of which lost seats. The most high-profile casualty of the elections was Deputy Prime Minister Sethy Regenvanu, who lost his seat in Malekula after serving in every government since independence. His PDP failed to gain a seat, despite (or perhaps because of) its having been crucial to the longevity of Carlot Korman's tenure in office.

Parliament convened on 18 December to elect a new prime minister and inaugurate a new government, but a boycott of the first sitting by a large number of new members delayed the process until the twenty-first. The interval between the elections and the installation of a new government, however, saw a jumble of improbable alliances and betrayals as parties sought to forge a majority coalition.

The rift in the Union of Moderate Parties was thrown into sharp relief on 4 December, when Vohor, claiming the support of a dozen members of parliament, signed a memorandum of understanding for a coalition with the Unity Front, in which he would be deputy prime minister. Two days later Carlot Korman's faction announced agreement with NUP to allow them to re-establish the coalition entered into in the first UMP-led government in 1991. Over the ensuing days, changes were constantly rung on these combinations as Vohor brokered his numbers between UF, the rump of Korman's UMP, and NUP. Finally, parliament sat and installed Vohor as the new leader

of a UMP-NUP government, in which former long-serving Prime Minister Father Walter Lini agreed to become deputy prime minister and minister for justice, culture and women's affairs. Ironically, his sister, and Vanuatu's only woman MP, Hilda Lini, was denied a cabinet post.

The new coalition, in which UMP members hold seven of twelve cabinet positions, shows a notable shift in regional affiliations toward Vanuatu's northern islands. For many reasons, the coalition seems unlikely to prove stable or cohesive in the longer term, as Vohor and Lini stand at almost

opposite poles in their political and development philosophies and differ profoundly on an issue as fundamental to future government policy as land ownership and land use.

DAVID AMBROSE

### *References*

*Vanuatu Weekly*. Port Vila.

*Trading Post*. Port Vila. Weekly.

*Pacific Report*. Canberra. Fortnightly newsletter.

Radio Australia.