

Political Reviews

*Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2017
to 30 June 2018*

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Reviews of the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, and Palau are not included in this issue.

GUAM

July 2017 to July 2018 spanned a time of fire and fury for the island of Guam. A war of words erupted between Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in August 2017, local protests blazed against the US military, and the government was swamped by crisis and mismanagement. All of this took place within the context of an island preparing to elect a new Maga'håga or Maga'låhen Guåhan (Governor of Guam).

North Korean threats to Guam as a proxy for the United States have become commonplace in recent years. However, in August 2017, these threats reached a new level. Following another round of sanctions instituted by the UN Security Council, North Korea threatened to turn the Pacific into “a sea of fire” (*NYT*, 8 Aug 2017). US President Donald Trump promised “fire and fury” in response, escalating the war of words and triggering massive international news coverage (*NYT*, 8 Aug 2017).

The people of Guam expressed a range of responses to the media, including fear but sometimes also faith in the United States (*NYT*, 9 Aug 2017). They asked the rest of the world not to let their home be lost in the global power struggle, as Guam too often appears on the map only

in times of catastrophe (*UT*, 14 Aug 2017).

Despite the heated rhetoric, the Trump administration soon sought to deescalate the war talk with a new strategy of engagement, and Trump met with Kim during a June 2018 peace summit in Singapore. Returning from the summit, Air Force One stopped on Andersen Air Force Base in Guam for two hours in the middle of the night. Trump made no public appearances or statements, although he did meet briefly with I Maga'låhen Guåhan, Eddie Baza Calvo, for a photo op aboard his plane (*GDP*, 14 June 2018).

After two terms and seven years of service, Calvo's term as governor—marred by both internal and external problems—was set to end in 2018. In particular, the Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 threatened catastrophe for Guam's finances and caused heightened discord between the governor and Guam's legislature.

The Calvo administration had sought in early 2017 to borrow US\$225 million for tax refunds (*GDP*, 6 March 2017). When I Liheslaturan Guåhan (Guam Legislature) resisted, Calvo called them into special session. His Bill 1-S passed in session, with seven votes in favor and six against; however, rules require that a bill be passed with at least eight votes (*GDP*, 23 Jan 2018). Calvo sued the legislature and, although the Guam Superior Court ruled in his favor, the senators

stated that they saw the court ruling as only advisory and did not transmit the bill for the governor's signature (*PDN*, 16 July 2018).

This financial squall soon threatened to become a full-fledged typhoon with the passage of the Trump administration's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Guam is linked to the US federal tax structure and assigns local income taxes based on federal rates. The tax cuts led to projections of a massive shortfall in Government of Guam (GovGuam) revenues, with estimates ranging from US\$100–160 million (*PDN*, 11 July 2018). The Calvo administration called on I Liheslaturan Guåhan to raise taxes as a means of keeping GovGuam from falling off a financial cliff. The Democrat-controlled I Liheslaturan Guåhan followed a different philosophy: Many of its members disagreed with Calvo's financial projections, arguing that, rather than raise taxes, outstanding taxes should be collected or non-essential government staff be furloughed (*PDN*, 24 July 2018).

Despite the immediate fiscal concerns that lay ahead, I Liheslaturan Guåhan had difficulty agreeing on proposals to increase revenue, due to it being an election year. With more than half of its current members either running for higher office or retiring, thirty-nine individuals (twenty Democrats and nineteen Republicans) filed paperwork seeking election or reelection (*GDP*, 27 June 2018). The fierce debates and politicking led to I Liheslaturan Guåhan several times rescinding its own proposals just days or even hours after having voted them into the budget. Senators seeking election or reelection were loath to raise

taxes at a time when they were seeking votes.

A proposed sales tax to create a dedicated funding source for the perennially beleaguered Guam Memorial Hospital became the focal point of senators' campaigning. In March 2018, I Liheslaturan Guåhan passed a six-month, 25 percent increase of the GRT (Gross Receipts Tax) for business and set 1 October as the start date for a 2 percent sales tax increase for island residents (*PDN*, 13 March 2018).

Soon after, Senator Mike San Nicolas, who had declared his candidacy for Guam's nonvoting delegate to the US House of Representatives, responded to public dissatisfaction by putting forth a bill to repeal the sales tax. On 2 July, I Liheslaturan Guåhan voted to repeal the sales tax, receiving a veto-proof majority. Governor Calvo called the repeal "a dark day for Guam" as the anticipated sales tax funds were intended to support the Guam Department of Education and the hospital (*GDP*, 2 July 2018). As of the writing of this review, the legislature continued to deliberate over the government budget.

While I Liheslaturan Guåhan endured its own politically motivated gridlock, much of the island was consumed by a heated gubernatorial campaign. An enthusiastic yet highly divided Democratic Party produced four contenders. Former four-term Senator Lourdes "Lou" Leon Guerrero, the president of her family's large local bank, along with her running mate, longtime party insider Joshua Tenorio, campaigned early and vigorously, seeking to establish themselves as the front-runners and appeal to youth voters.

By spring 2018, three more Democratic teams were challenging “Lou and Josh.” The popular Senator Frank Blas Aguon Jr chose former US Attorney for Guam and the Northern Marianas and former Guam Attorney General Alicia Garrido Limtiaco as his running mate (*GDP*, 23 April 2018). Former Governor Carl Gutierrez chose former Chief of Police Fred Bordallo as his running mate (*GDP*, 23 April 2018). Gutierrez was the governor of Guam from 1993 to 2003 and, since leaving office, has unsuccessfully tried three times to be returned to the position of Maga'låhen Guåhan.

The final entry was Senator Dennis Rodriguez, whose running mate David Cruz had no history of political service but earned a six-figure income teaching JROTC at a high school (*PDN*, 31 May 2018). There was some public outcry regarding Cruz's government employment while running for political office. Rodriguez's close relationship with a scandal-plagued former Calvo loyalist also tarnished his image. By July 2018, Lou Leon Guerrero and Josh Tenorio were considered the Democratic front-runners.

Calvo's two-term lieutenant governor, Ray Tenorio, and former Senator Tony Ada ran unopposed on the Republican ticket. Their campaign touted the success of the current administration in reducing island unemployment, the timely paying of tax refunds (not common in previous administrations), completing long-standing public works projects, and record-setting tourism numbers. But their campaign struggled in the first half of 2018 as the administration was rocked with numerous scandals, including allegations of mismanage-

ment and financial crisis that were exacerbated in Guam by the Trump tax cuts.

In July, Guam Memorial Hospital (GMH), the only public hospital on Guam, was informed by the Joint Commission that it had lost its accreditation (*GDP*, 18 July 2018). The Joint Commission is a nonprofit organization that provides accreditation for more than 20,000 medical programs and institutions in the United States alone.

GMH was put on deaccreditation notice in January 2018; proposals by its administrators to mollify the Joint Commission did not succeed. GMH was also under the threat of losing its certification through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in October 2018, unless a series of corrective measures were implemented. The Calvo administration highlighted the need to fully fund the hospital after it lost accreditation. Members of I Liheslaturan Guåhan, including Speaker Cruz, responded by arguing that mismanagement by Calvo appointees was the problem, not a lack of funding (*GDP*, 18 July 2018).

While Republican gubernatorial candidate Ray Tenorio was largely untouched by the arguments within the legislature, he soon had his own controversy. On 7 July, the longtime lieutenant governor made an appearance at the Guam BBQ Block Party in the tourist district of Tumon, where he allegedly lifted a weapon from a police officer on duty (*GDP*, 9 July 2018).

Tenorio, a former police officer and trainer, stated that he acted in his capacity as the overseer of public safety; the governor confirmed that Tenorio held that role at the time

of the incident (PNC, 13 July 2018). Tenorio said he acted, though informally, to correct a police officer whose weapon was not properly secured in its holster, causing potential public danger. He described briefly touching and removing the weapon as a “teachable moment” for the officer (GDP, 10 July 2018).

Outcry over the incident was immediate and widespread. Given that it was an election year, it was not surprising that Tenorio’s political opponents, as led by junior Democratic Senator Telena Nelson, were especially vocal. Some called for the lieutenant governor’s arrest or alleged that he was drunk, had committed assault, or had committed a felony. Tenorio publicly apologized for the incident and said that the “teachable moment” was his (MV, 11 July 2018). The Office of the Attorney General of Guam opened an investigation into the lieutenant governor’s actions in July 2018 and declined to comment “so as not to politicize the investigation” (PDN, 12 July 2018).

Long-standing tensions between the local Guam community and the US federal government manifested over the past year, primarily around two issues: US plans to increase its military presence on Guam and threats to the Chamorro Land Trust.

In 2017, public outcry increased over threats to the environmental refuge and cultural site of Litekyan as a result of the US military’s plans to build a firing range. The site of an ancient Chamorro village and ancestral family lands that was previously seized by the military, Litekyan has been a US National Fish and Wildlife Refuge since 1993 and is under

federal control. The military’s plans to build a firing range on the bluffs above Litekyan would prevent people from visiting for much of the year and would threaten several endangered native species of animals and plants. The group Prutehi Litekyan: Save Ritidian (PL: SR) was formed in 2017 to resist the environmental and cultural threat. PL: SR has met with significant success, packing the public hearing room of the Guam Legislature on multiple occasions in support of anti-buildup resolutions (GDP, 20 Aug 2017).

On 23 September 2017, the youth group Manhoben Para Guåhan (Youth for Guam) organized a demonstration outside the gates of Andersen Air Force Base, very near Litekyan. Joined by community members including Harold Cruz, the chief of staff for Senator Wil Castro, and Iraq War veteran Senator Fernando Esteves, the youth formed a human chain to block the front gate to the base for twenty minutes in protest of the military’s plans. They shouted chants of “Hita i taotao tåno!” (“We are the people of the land”) and asked that the base commander come hear their concerns. Cruz was arrested for his role in the protest and is currently running for senator in I Liheslaturan Guåhan (PDN, 23 Sept 2018).

In October 2017, a series of solidarity events took place in Guam between Prutehi Litekyan and the No Helipad Takae Resident Society of Okinawa. Two activists from Okinawa visited Guam, gave presentations, and screened documentaries in order to help form a greater bond between island-based demilitarization movements (PDN, 25 Oct 2017).

Frustrated with the refusal of the US federal government to listen to the people of Guam on the military buildup issue, two leaders in PL: SR—high-school teacher Sabina Flores Perez and university instructor Kelly Marsh-Taitano—declared their candidacy for I Liheslaturan Guåhan in 2018. The group also considered filing a lawsuit to prevent construction from taking place on the bases but waited to hear the outcome of another lawsuit in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands regarding US military plans for the northern islands of Tinian and Pâgan (*MV*, 17 July 2018).

As activists sought to protect sacred Chamorro lands from federal interference, a GovGuam agency faced similar threats. Following the massive US military increase on Guam in the wake of World War II, thousands of Chamorro families were displaced in order to build large air force and navy bases in the north and south of Guam. The Chamorro Land Trust was implemented in 1995 to provide land to landless Chamorros as a means of righting this historical wrong.

In September 2017, the US Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against the Government of Guam, alleging that the Chamorro Land Trust violated the Fair Housing Act (*PDN*, 28 Sept 2017). The attorney general of Guam, Elizabeth Barrett Anderson, joined Maga'låhen Guåhan Calvo and I Liheslaturan Guåhan to defend the Chamorro Land Trust (*PDN*, 9 Oct 2017). Congresswoman Madeleine Bordallo sought to offer solutions in the US Congress to legitimize the trust but no concrete action was taken (*PDN*, 4 Oct 2017).

In 2018, reports surfaced about mismanagement within the Chamorro Land Trust, overshadowing the federal lawsuit. Although approximately 2,400 land requests have been fulfilled, about 4,700 more remain; some people have waited more than twenty years (*PDN*, 2 May 2018). Relatives of Chamorro Land Trust employees and board members appear to have been allowed to skip ahead of others in line, and some officials, including Senator Régine Biscoe Lee, were implicated in possible illegal lease transfers (*GDP*, 26 April 2018).

Powerful three-decade Archbishop of Guam Anthony Sablan Apuron was replaced in 2016 after a number of scandals involving the development of a new sect within the church, possible mismanagement of church assets, and, most shockingly to the small island community, many lawsuits alleging the sexual abuse of children by priests on Guam (Bevacqua and Bowman 2018). More than a dozen of these lawsuits named Apuron himself as the abuser.

In March 2018, the disgraced archbishop faced a private canonical trial in the Vatican as well. Guam's huge Catholic community received word that Apuron had been convicted of certain misdeeds; however, the proceedings were relatively secretive and little was revealed, particularly about his potential sentence. Apuron announced he would appeal his convictions (*UT*, 14 June 2018).

The Archdiocese of Hagåtña currently faces about 170 accusations of sexual abuse committed against children by Catholic priests on Guam (*PDN*, 1 June 2018). Ironically, one of Apuron's most prominent critics,

“Jungle Watch” blogger Tim Rohr, faced his own publicity scandal in 2018, when his estranged wife and children accused him in court of family violence and abuse, including the sexual abuse of his daughter as a child (KUAM, 9 May 2018).

Tourism arrivals reached historic highs in 2017 and 2018, but problematic clouds were gathering in the distance. While 2017 was a year of record highs at 1.56 million visitors, 2018 was a year of major changes in the market (GDP, 2 Jan 2018). The two traditional “pillars” of Guam’s economy, the military and tourism, have long been naturally opposed, and visitors from Japan, long the largest sector of Guam’s successful tourism industry, dropped significantly in the wake of Trump and Kim’s war of words.

Overall, Japanese visitors decreased by 16.8 percent in 2017. As an example, the 35,101 Japanese tourists who visited Guam in June 2018 represented a decrease of 13,870 (39.5 percent, or over a third) compared to the same total in June 2017 (GDP, 23 July 2018). Five years ago, in June 2013, tourist arrivals from Japan were nearly double that. Perhaps in response to tensions between the United States and China, tourists from mainland China also dropped precipitously, by 43 percent (PDN, 30 July 2018).

Opportunities seemed to be opening up from other East Asian countries, as South Korean tourist numbers on Guam increased by 25.6 percent, achieving record highs in 2017 (GDP, 23 July 2018). However, the tourists coming to Guam spent less than in the past, reducing the traditionally

large benefit to Guam’s economy from tourism. For example, Koreans spent far less on average than Japanese visitors, who tended to spend nearly US\$600 each on Guam outside of their hotel and plane tickets (PDN, 18 April 2018). According to exit surveys conducted by the Guam Visitors Bureau in March 2018, Korean visitors spent roughly the same as Japanese visitors on hotels and transportation but spent about US\$400 less on gifts and souvenirs while on island (PDN, 18 April 2018).

The Guam Museum, long plagued by delays and controversies, finally revealed its only permanent exhibit, *I Hinanao-ta (Our Journey)*, on 3 May 2018, almost four years after it was originally scheduled to open to the public. A series of last-minute and internally controversial changes from a hastily formed technical review committee in early 2017 had pushed back the opening for another year. Still, Guam had not had a functioning museum for more than twenty years, and its opening was a point of civic pride (PNC, 4 May 2018).

In June 2018, a bitter, decades-long struggle to win some sort of reparations for Chamorros that suffered during the Japanese occupation of Guam during World War II finally received acknowledgment from the US federal government. Still, the convoluted way in which this chapter of Chamorro history was closed only reinforced the island’s marginal status as a US colony.

After signing peace treaties following World War II, the United States assumed all of Japan’s future obligations in terms of war reparations. Chamorros, like others across Asia

and the Pacific, suffered greatly during Japanese occupation.

Chamorros long sought reparations from the United States for their suffering, but for decades the issue failed to be addressed in the US Congress. Sometimes this failure was due to conflicts within GovGuam over appropriate compensation, other times because of resistance from the US Congress itself. On 23 December 2016, President Obama signed into law the Guam World War II Loyalty Recognition Act. This law, coming seventy-two years after the end of the war in Guam, was a bittersweet form of closure. Although it provided compensation ranging from US\$15,000 to US\$25,000, depending on the type of suffering experienced, only those still living as of the date of the act's signing were eligible (*GDP*, 28 July). The overwhelming majority of Chamorros and their descendants, therefore, were barred from the program.

Furthermore, the funding source for these reparations was a source of much local ire, as any compensation would come from monies that had already been set aside for GovGuam to receive (*GDP*, 13 Dec 2017). In essence, after decades of inaction, GovGuam, not the US Congress, would pay war reparations. The window for applications closed on 20 June 2018, and it is estimated that fewer than three thousand claims were submitted (*GDP*, 20 June 2018).

In 2017, the University of Guam announced the imminent retirement of its longtime president, former US congressman from Guam and Chamorro rights activist Robert Underwood. The search for his replacement was marred by controversy. The initial list of final-

ists included no indigenous Chamorros, no women, and no candidates with any substantive connection to Guam or Micronesia, although Guam law requires that the president of the university have knowledge and understanding of Guam and its region.

The search committee, which had paid US\$100,000 to an off-island agency to vet and rank its candidates, defended their selections, despite the fact that one of their finalists had left both of his previous two positions in disgrace (*GDP*, 23 May 2018). A petition that garnered thousands of signatures—including from university students—called on I Liheslaturan Guåhan to conduct oversight in the matter but was ignored (*GDP*, 4 June 2018). Thomas Krise, a retired US Air Force officer and former president of Pacific Lutheran University, was eventually selected. Although Krise had no knowledge or understanding of Guam or Micronesia, he argued that his scholarship on the Caribbean gave him an “appreciation” for island issues (*PDN*, 11 June 2018).

In 2018, Guam said farewell to former Lieutenant Governor of Guam Eddie Diego Reyes (1983–1987), who passed away at the age of eighty-eight. He had been elected lieutenant governor alongside Ricardo J Bordallo. Prior to that, Reyes distinguished himself in the US military during the Vietnam War era, retiring as a colonel in the air force (*GDP*, 16 April 2018). Guam also lost Chamorro-rights activist Ron Teehan at age sixty-three. Teehan had been a tireless advocate for indigenous land rights, working with both the Chamorro Land Trust and the Guam Landowners Association. As a member of the group OPI-R

(Organization of People for Indigenous Rights), he and others pushed for Chamorro people to define themselves as indigenous in international and local contexts. In 1982, he was one of the first Chamorros to travel to New York to testify on behalf of Guam at the United Nations (*PDN*, 5 Feb 2018).

In response to the bellicose rhetoric around North Korean threats and various forms of federal interference, a historic delegation from Guam was organized to travel to testify before the UN General Assembly Fourth Committee. The Guam Commission on Decolonization and the decolonization outreach group Independent Guåhan jointly organized the October 2017 trip to New York.

The Commission on Decolonization sent elected leaders I Maga'låhen Guåhan Calvo, Senator Fernando Esteves, Senator Therese Terlaje, and Senator Telena Nelson. Independent Guåhan sent community members from Guam, as well as from the Chamorro diaspora in the United States. Overall, the testimony provided a unified message, informing the United Nations about the state of affairs in Guam and highlighting the need for the international community to assist in pressuring the United States to decolonize its colony. As Senator Nelson testified, "We have no ability to vote, no ability to govern ourselves, and, as it stands, until the United States says so, we have no voice" (*PDN*, 8 Oct 2017).

Last-minute lobbying from the Guam delegation resulted in the passing of a resolution on Guam containing critical language about the rights of the Chamorro people and the dangers that US militarization

presented to their lands, waters, and other resources. The resolution passed in December 2017 with ninety-three votes in favor, eight against, and sixty-five abstentions. The United States voted against the resolution, arguing (incorrectly, according to the United Nations' own mandates) that Guam's political status was solely a domestic issue with no international obligations (*GDP*, 23 June 2018).

The decolonization conversation in Guam continued to grow in 2018, in particular with a historic forum among the candidates seeking to become Guam's next governor in May 2018. Organized by a cohort of public administration master's students at the University of Guam, the forum was titled "One Guam: Towards Decolonization" and was attended by close to 900 people (*PDN*, 9 May 2018).

Two of the candidates, former Governor Gutierrez and Senator Frank Aguon, made clear their preferences for Guam's political future, arguing that independence was the best option. The other candidates did not indicate preferences but all promised their sincere support to continue education on the issue until a plebiscite for Guam's native inhabitants could take place. Senator Dennis Rodriguez, the son of Filipino immigrants to Guam, made an impassioned plea to others who, like himself, were not classed as native inhabitants of the island. He asked that they join him in supporting self-determination for indigenous Chamorro people (*GDP*, 9 May 2018).

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RMI's first Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States in 1986 (Walsh and Heine 2011). His government posts spanned decades and included senator for Mājro and Kuwajleen atolls, minister of finance and foreign affairs, ambassador to the United Nations, and RMI climate ambassador (*MIJ*, 1 Sept 2017). DeBrum was a staunch advocate for justice for the survivors of the aftermath of sixty-seven nuclear tests conducted by the United States on Pikinni and Ānewetak atolls. He sought to secure a world free of nuclear weapons and in 2014 filed a lawsuit on behalf of the RMI aimed at forcing the world's nuclear powers to reengage in nuclear disarmament talks (*MIJ*, 1 Sept 2017). DeBrum was also a leader in the movement to reverse the effects of climate change and was instrumental in the passage of the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In addition to being nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, deBrum was the recipient of several awards including the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation Distinguished Peace Leadership Award in 2012 and a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award from the government of Germany in 2017 (*MIJ*, 25 Aug, 3 Nov 2017).

Weeks before deBrum's passing in late August 2017, the Marshall Islands lost sitting Naṃdik Atoll Senator and Minister Mattlan (Matt) Zackhras. Prior to his service as President Hilda Heine's minister in assistance, Zackhras's portfolio during his four terms in office included the ministries of public works and of resources and development. Zackhras was instrumental in securing funding for local

MARSHALL ISLANDS

For the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the period under review saw the passing of a number of public servants, community members, and advocates, including several trailblazers in nuclear and climate activism, advocacy, and scholarship. Tony deBrum devoted his life's work to the advancement of the Marshall Islands and to procuring nuclear and climate justice for Marshall Islanders. After serving on the Congress of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands' first Constitutional Convention in the 1970s, deBrum played a key role in securing independence from the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and in the negotiations that resulted in the

and national sustainable development projects and was recognized for his work promoting sustainable black pearl farming, the formation of the Namdrik [Naṃdik] Copra Cooperative, and the RMI's first virgin coconut oil processing operation (*MIJ*, 11 Aug 2017). In a November 2017 special election, Naṃdik voters opted to keep Zackhras's Nitijeḷā (Parliament) seat in the family by electing his brother Wisely Zackhras to succeed him (*MIJ*, 17 Nov 2017).

The RMI also lost three longtime nuclear advocates during this period. Lemeyo Abon was one of the last surviving ri-Roñḷap (ri- means person/people of/from) to have lived through the fallout of the Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb test on Pikinni Atoll on 1 March 1954. Abon recounted her experiences in books, films, newspaper articles, and a statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2012; she died in February 2018. A resident of the Marshall Islands for almost fifty years, Bill Graham devoted much of his career to seeking justice and compensation for the survivors of US nuclear testing. Graham served as public advocate for the RMI Nuclear Claims Tribunal for more than twenty years and had recently been appointed to the newly established RMI National Nuclear Commission. Graham died in Honolulu on 1 March 2018, the sixty-fourth anniversary of the Castle Bravo test (*MIJ*, 9 March 2018). Nuclear scholar and advocate Dr Robert (Bob) Kiste passed away on 28 November 2017. In addition to publishing *The Bikinians: A Study in Forced Migration* in 1974 and working as a consultant for the Micronesian Legal Service Cor-

poration in the 1970s, Kiste inspired scores of Pacific Islands scholars as a professor and director of the Center for Pacific Islands Studies from 1978 to 2002 (Lal 2004).

Among the many other traditional leaders and prominent community members who died during this period were Mājro aḷap (lineage head) Newi Nathan; Kuwajleen aḷap and Constitutional Convention delegate Stephen "Kodri" Dribo; and Castle Bravo nuclear test survivor Tempo Alfred. Sr Dorothy Nook, the sole Marshallese Catholic nun who dedicated much of her career to enhancing educational opportunities as principal of Marshall Islands High School, president of the College of the Marshall Islands, and director of Catholic Schools in Micronesia, passed away on 5 June 2018 (*MIJ*, 8 June 2018).

As noted in last year's review for the RMI (LaBriola 2018), the fourth Constitutional Convention (Con-Con) was convened in April 2017 to consider more than twenty prospective amendments to the RMI Constitution. Proposals included the direct election of the president, revised eligibility requirements for RMI citizenship and Nitijeḷā candidacy, and the future status of Ānen-kio Atoll (Wake Island). Following a recess and several public forums, the Con-Con reconvened on 10 July 2017 to discuss and vote on the proposals. Of these, Proposal 4, which would have shifted the responsibility for the election of the president from the Nitijeḷā to the general electorate, was the most controversial (RMI Constitutional Convention 2017b). Despite its popularity, delegates rejected Proposal 4 on 18 December 2017. Of the 30 votes

required for passage, the proposal garnered only 23 in the affirmative, with 13 delegates voting against the measure and 10 others not present (*MIJ*, 22 Dec 2017). The outcome sparked an uproar on social media, most notably in the Facebook group Kewan Jela, an online forum for discussing current events in the RMI and the diaspora (Kewan Jela 2018).

Although that proposal failed to move forward, convention delegates approved several others. Proposal 19 (36 to 0) would add a subsection to article IV, section 4 of the RMI Constitution requiring any qualified candidate for the Nitijeļā to be a natural-born citizen and have land rights by birth (RMI Constitutional Convention 2017c). Proposals 1 and 22 (36 to 0) would amend article XI, section 2(b), making it more difficult for foreign nationals to obtain RMI citizenship (RMI Constitutional Convention 2017a, 2017e). Proposal 21 (35 to 0) would amend article IV, section 2(1) to officially add Ānenkio Atoll (Wake Island) to an RMI electoral district (RMI Constitutional Convention 2017d), thus strengthening RMI efforts to assert traditional rights despite US control of the atoll since 1898 (Johnson 2016). These and other proposals approved by the requisite two-thirds of convention delegates will move on to a referendum later in 2018. Proposals must be approved by two-thirds of the electorate to become constitutional amendments (RMI Constitution 1979).

As convention delegates debated proposed amendments, the RMI Nitijeļā continued its work of governing and debating legislative bills, with most of the acts that passed focused

on health and labor. In the area of health, the Health Fund (Amendment) Act 2018 gives more authority to the RMI Medical Referral Board in determining when a patient should be sent off island for medical treatment (RMI Nitijeļā 2018b), while the Senior Citizens Act 2018 seeks to enhance access to medical care for the nation's elderly by mandating a 25 percent monthly discount on some services related to medical treatment (RMI Nitijeļā 2018c). Meanwhile, in the area of employment, the Marshall Islands Employment Equal Opportunity Act 2017 seeks to ensure workers' rights by requiring that any entity doing business in the RMI "offer all employees the same employee benefits," including medical and life insurance and retirement and pension benefits, and provides that any employer who fails to offer these benefits equally be subject to a penalty of up to US\$50,000 (RMI Nitijeļā 2017b).

In what was one of the speediest approval processes in recent memory, the Nitijeļā passed the Declaration and Issuance of the Sovereign Currency Act 2018 into law on 26 February 2018, despite less than a week of debate, warnings by Attorney General Filimon Manoni and Banking Commissioner Sultan Korean, and an expression of concern by Bank of Marshall Islands President Patrick Chen (*MIJ*, 2 March 2018). The legislation makes the RMI the first country to "declare and issue a digital decentralized currency based on blockchain technology as legal tender" (RMI Nitijeļā 2018a). Its passage clears the way for the RMI and its Israel-based partner Neema to issue up to 24 million units of cryptocurrency,

dubbed the “Sovereign” or “SOV” for short, half of which will be floated for worldwide consumption during the initial coin offering (ICO). Kuwajleen Atoll senator David Paul said the currency offers the RMI an opportunity to earn millions of dollars simply by making it legal tender, and without investing any money into the project (*MIJ*, 2 March 2018). The act requires that proceeds from the sale of RMI SOV units be allocated to several trust funds created prior to the ICO, including the RMI National Trust Fund, the RMI Green Climate Fund, the RMI Nuclear Legacy and Health Care Fund, and the Resident-Citizen SOV Allocation Fund (RMI Nitijeļā 2018a). Despite warnings from International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff that the “potential benefits from the issuance would not be large enough to compensate for the potential costs,” and a recommendation “that the authorities seriously reconsider the issuance of the SOV,” President Hilda Heine, Senator Paul, and other RMI leaders remain committed to the scheme (*IMF* 2018).

In October 2017, 12 of the Nitijeļā’s 33 senators introduced another controversial bill to address public outrage over the termination of postal voting by RMI citizens residing abroad (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2017). In 2016, the Nitijeļā had passed an amendment to the Election and Referendum Act “eliminating the postal voting system for persons residing outside of the Republic” (RMI Nitijeļā 2016, 5). Approved by a slim margin (13 to 12), the act aimed to “allow only those citizens who pay taxes and are residents of the country to choose their national and local representatives” (LaBriola 2018, 148). The legislation

sparked concern within the Council of Irooj (Council of Chiefs) and anger and dissent on the part of off-island Marshall Islanders, who voiced their disapproval on the Kewan Jela forum (LaBriola 2018; Kewan Jela 2018). To address these concerns, senators introduced the Election and Referendum (Amendment) Act 2017, which would “repeal and restore the postal voting system for persons residing outside of the Republic” (RMI Nitijeļā 2017a, 4). The bill would revert the postal voting system to its pre-2016 status by eliminating language restricting eligibility to vote by mail. In a speech before the Nitijeļā, former Kuwajleen Atoll Senator Jeban Riklon suggested that the elimination of postal voting was a violation of the RMI Constitution and that off-island RMI citizens who contribute to the economy should be afforded the same “fundamental rights” as on-island citizens (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2017). Other senators countered with concerns about the costs and logistics associated with the administration of postal voting and about past incidents of fraud (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2017).

As senators and Con-Con delegates debated proposed legislation and constitutional amendments, local and national leadership grappled with financial concerns related to the Marshall Islands Trust Fund (RMI Trust Fund) and the Resettlement Trust Fund for the People of Bikini [Pikinni] (KBE Trust Fund). (KBE stands for Kili/Bikini/Ejit [Kōle/Pikinni/Āje], with Kōle Island and Āje Island being the two longest-standing Pikinni resettlement sites.) The Marshall Islands Trust Fund was established in 2005 as part of the amended US-RMI Compact of Free Association (COFA), to be

financed by the US and the RMI with the aim of supporting RMI economic self-sufficiency after compact funding expires in 2023 (US Department of State 2003). In October 2017, it was discovered that nearly US\$1 million had been illegally withdrawn from RMI Trust Fund accounts then overseen by the US-based State Street Bank and Trust Company (State Street) (*MIJ*, 3 Nov 2017). On learning of the withdrawals, RMI officials called on State Street “to seize and stop any and all further activity with the” affected accounts (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2017). Investigations revealed that the transfers occurred as the result of lapses in protocols on the part of State Street, which had restored the total unaudited value of the fund to more than US\$350 million by the end of September 2017 (*MIJ*, 3 Nov 2017). In July 2017, the Trust Fund Committee initiated a transfer of fund custody from State Street to Vanguard Institutional Advisory Services—a shift that had been planned prior to the breach. At the time of writing, no further information was available regarding the person(s) responsible for the withdrawals, although no members of the RMI government or any of the account trustees or administrators appear to have been directly involved (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2017).

The KBE Trust Fund also underwent a dramatic transition. The fund was established by the United States through legislation to support cleanup and resettlement efforts and provide reparations to the people of Pikinni Atoll to compensate for losses incurred as the result of US nuclear testing (Niedenthal 2001, 187–189). Annual expenditures typically range

from US\$5 to 7 million and are used to support the infrastructure and resettlement needs of ri-Pikinni living on Kōle Island and Ajei Island, Mājro Atoll. These include government operations and salaries, housing construction and repairs, food, and education (Niedenthal 2001, 187–189). The fund reached its peak at US\$129 million but was valued at US\$67 million in September 2017 as the result of severe losses incurred in the 2008 global financial crisis (*MIJ*, 8 Dec 2017, 16 Feb 2018). Since the fund’s inception, the United States has overseen expenditures, with the KBE local council and trust fund liaison preparing the KBE annual budget in consultation with the US Department of the Interior (USDO1) Office of Insular Affairs. To keep the fund solvent, annual allocations were based on its performance over the three previous years (*MIJ*, 8 Dec 2017); as a result, the KBE budget has varied over the years from between US\$5–12 million depending on fund performance. More recently, annual allocations have remained steady at US\$6–7 million.

In August 2017, the KBE Local Government Council passed a resolution seeking to terminate US oversight of the KBE Trust Fund (KBE Local Government 2017). Soon after, KBE Mayor Anderson Jibas issued a letter to Isaac Edwards, senior majority counsel for the Energy and Natural Resources Committee of the US Senate, requesting to end US involvement in KBE budgeting, including Office of Insular Affairs veto power, and to allow the KBE Local Government to deal directly with its trustee bank. The requested “rescript,” or change of oversight, would give the KBE

Local Government full control over decisions concerning the KBE annual budget; declare void any existing policies limiting the authority of KBE leadership to determine the future resettlement of Pikinni Atoll; eliminate the position of trust fund liaison; authorize the KBE Local Council to provide its annual budget to the USDOJ for reference only; eliminate the right of the KBE local government trustee to question drawdown requests; and give the KBE mayor and his or her designee sole authority to authorize withdrawals (KBE Local Government 2017).

On 16 November 2017, Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs Doug Domenech notified Jibas of the decision by the USDOJ to accept “the Rescript as a valid amendment to the 1988 Amended Resettlement Trust Fund Agreement” and to recognize the mayor and KBE Local Council as solely responsible for the fund (USDOJ 2017). The letter noted that the USDOJ would “never again interact with” the KBE mayor or KBE Local Council “on any aspect of the Resettlement Trust Fund, including the possibility of the Department’s seeking additional appropriations” (Domenech 2017, 2). The only exceptions would be the interior secretary’s ongoing authority to use discretion in approving income-generating projects on Kōle and Ājei islands and to report to the US Congress on the future funding needs of Pikinni Atoll one year before the completion of the resettlement program (Domenech 2017, 2).

Within days of the decision, US Senator Lisa Murkowski (Republican, Alaska), who chairs the US Senate committee that oversees Marshall Islands policy and funding, rebuked

USDOJ for relinquishing control without congressional involvement (*Washington Post*, 5 Feb 2018). Murkowski’s concern was heightened following a US\$11 million withdrawal from the fund just days after the rescript (*MIJ*, 8 Dec 2017). In an effort to reimpose limits on future withdrawals, Murkowski introduced US Senate Bill S.2182 to cap annual expenditures at “5 percent of the principal of the Fund, based on the average market value of the Fund for the previous 5 fiscal years,” with the goal of assuring the community’s eventual resettlement (US Senate 2017). Former KBE Mayor Alson Kelen shared Murkowski’s concern, noting that the decision to rescript authority should have involved the entire Pikinni community (*MIJ*, 8 Dec 2017). Mayor Jibas responded that, as Pikinni’s elected leaders, he and the council are solely responsible for how the fund is spent.

The rescript and ensuing US\$11 million drawdown sparked a flurry of high-level activity between December 2017 and February 2018, including a visit to the RMI by a team led by Doug Domenech and Director of the Office of Insular Affairs Nikolao Pula; a US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing convened by committee chair Lisa Murkowski; and a congressional delegation to Kuwajleen Atoll, also led by Senator Murkowski. The 6 February 2018 US Senate committee hearing included testimony by Doug Domenech, Anderson Jibas, and Jack Niedenthal. Mayor Jibas maintained that KBE “elected leaders are best suited to determine how [KBE Trust Fund] monies are to be used” and that the proposed US Senate bill would take KBE “back to

a colonialist and paternalistic system that says the bureaucrats in a Federal agency know what is best for the people of [Pikinni]" (Jibas statement published in *MIJ*, 16 Feb 2018). Niedenthal countered that the rescript represents a dereliction of duty by the United States to the people of Pikinni, whose lives continue to be impacted by the aftermath of US nuclear testing (US Senate 2018). To this, the editors of the *Marshall Islands Journal* suggested that Pikinni leadership "may have unwittingly fallen into a trap," allowing the United States to use the rescript to "inexorably [wash] its hands of its nuclear weapons test legacy in the Marshall Islands" (*MIJ*, 22 Dec 2017).

Several key developments in the areas of land access, wages, infrastructure, health, and nuclear justice had a bearing on the lives of Marshall Islanders at home and in the diaspora during this period. A July 2017 agreement between the RMI and the US Army Space and Missile Defense Command gave Kuwajleen Atoll residents periodic access to islands in the atoll's mid-corridor region "for farming, fishing, and burial during periods when there are no missile tests" (*MIJ*, 21 July 2017). The US Army has overseen intercontinental anti-ballistic missile testing and other operations at Kuwajleen since the 1960s and in 1965 relocated residents of the central two-thirds of the atoll to seventy-eight-acre Ebjā (Ebeye) Island to create a missile target in the Kuwajleen lagoon. Access to the area has since been severely restricted, and landowners have periodically staged protests demanding access to and compensation for the use of their land (Walsh and Heine 2011,

315–316). The new agreement is significant for the landowner-residents of Ebjā, where an estimated 11,000 people live in crowded conditions with limited access to fertile land for farming and gathering food crops (RMI Office of the President 2011).

Also during this period, Kuwajleen Atoll leaders negotiated to reverse a decision by DynCorp International—which took over operations for US Army Garrison, Kwajalein [Kuwajleen] Atoll (USAG-KA) in March 2018—to cut the wages of Marshallese employees by up to 60 percent. When affected employees threatened to go on strike, RMI and Kuwajleen Atoll leadership met with DynCorp, base commander Colonel James DeOre, and US Ambassador Karen Stewart, and DynCorp agreed to maintain or raise wages for the majority of Marshallese employees (*MIJ*, 12 Jan 2018). Meanwhile, a reverse osmosis water facility, a renovated boat ramp and commercial dock, seawall improvements, three Wellness Center Gardens, and basketball and tennis courts were either completed or underway on Ebjā. These and other projects promise to enhance quality of life and access to services for the Ebjā community (*MIJ*, 20 Oct 2018).

The RMI faced several challenges in the area of health during this period. Among these were a mumps outbreak that saw over 1,400 cases in the second half of 2017 (*MIJ*, 13 Oct 2017); more than 1,100 cases of conjunctivitis between December 2017 and May 2018 (*MIJ*, 18 May 2018); and dengue fever and meningococcal meningitis outbreaks on several outer islands (*MIJ*, 27 April 2018). Faced with some of the highest tuberculosis (TB)

rates in the Pacific Islands, the Ministry of Health and Human Services launched a massive TB screening effort on Mājro Atoll in May 2018, with the goal of testing 100 percent of the atoll's population, or approximately 26,000 people (*MIJ*, 27 April, 18 May 2018). In the first week, more than 10 percent of the 1,400 people screened tested positive for TB, and at least 150 people were receiving treatment at the close of June 2018. Encouraging health developments included the certification of the Marshall Islands Red Cross Society by the International Federation of the Red Cross in March 2018 (*MIJ*, 30 March 2018); the near completion of the first phase of the new Mājro hospital (*MIJ*, 1 June 2018); and the extension of publicly funded health care to low-income Marshall Islanders residing in Washington State (*MIJ*, 6 April 2018).

In a short film tribute to his life and life's work entitled *Papa's Last Voyage* (2017), Tony deBrum invoked a Marshallese proverb, calling Marshall Islanders and the global community to action: "An piliñliñ koba, kōmman lometō. The ocean is made up of drops. Each one of us is responsible for a drop of ocean. If you take care of that drop, if he takes care of his drop, and she takes care of her drop, we can take care of the world." In the crusade for nuclear justice, the RMI along with several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activists nurtured various "drops" of policy, regional cooperation, and art to advance the cause. While the RMI staffed the National Nuclear Commission, established by the Nitijelā in March 2017 "to develop a detailed strategy and plan of action for pursuing"

nuclear justice and coordinate national efforts related to nuclear testing and policy (RMI Nitijelā 2017c), the NGO Radiation Exposure Awareness Crusaders for Humanity–Marshall Islands (REACH-MI) expanded efforts to strengthen civil society engagements with nuclear issues through a partnership with the regional NGO Raising Pacific Voices (*MIJ*, 27 Aug 2017). In March 2018, activist and poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and filmmaker Dan Lin traveled to Ānewetak Atoll to produce a short film based on Jetñil-Kijiner's poem "Anointed" (Lin and Jetñil-Kijiner 2018). The result is a compelling audiovisual portrait of the social, economic, and environmental legacies of US nuclear testing on Ānewetak, site of forty-four nuclear tests conducted by the United States and home of the Runit Dome, a storage unit for approximately 73,000 cubic meters of radioactive material built over what was once Runit Island (Smith-Norris 2016, 36–37). Viewers learn that 122 nations voted in favor of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in July 2017. Among the nations that did not vote for the treaty were the world's nine nuclear-armed nations, all named in the 2014 lawsuit filed on behalf of the RMI by Tony deBrum (LaBriola 2016). While the RMI voted in favor of the treaty in July 2017, it has thus far failed to sign on to it due to concerns about potential conflicts with the US-RMI Compact of Free Association. Time will tell whether President Hilda Heine's government will contribute to the care of this particular drop of ocean—and in turn the world—with its formal approval.

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COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

When the period in review began, one of the two biggest concerns for Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) leaders and policy-makers was the looming end of the federal CW (CNMI-only Transitional Worker) program, which provides special CW-1 visas that allow non-US citizens to work in the CNMI. Set to expire in December 2019, the CW program has provided the bulk of the workers making up the CNMI private sector, providing much-needed support to the economy. The other concern was the November 2018 general election.

During the period under review, the party in power, the local Republican Party, could feel the wind in its sails. The local economy, whose spectacular downturn started in 1998, was finally recovering. For the first time in so many years, tourist numbers were up, and there were new investors actually investing in the CNMI (US Government Accountability Office 2017). More economic activities meant more government revenue, and the issues that had bedeviled previous administrations and legislatures—the lack of funding for critical services, agencies, and outstanding obligations, among them the pension fund—could now be addressed. But, as the late veteran newscaster Eric Sevareid is widely attributed to have said, the chief cause of problems are solutions.

For some residents, their main concern was no longer the economy but “overdevelopment” (MV, 29 June 2018). For these residents, the gaudy Saipan casino, still under construction,

symbolized larger issues in the Commonwealth.

Opponents of the Saipan casino argued that voters should have been able to approve its legalization. Proponents, however, argued that the casino legalization went through the proper legal process. The casino bill was signed into law by then-Governor Eloy S Inos, who said that it was the only way to prevent the collapse of the pension fund. Opponents of the new law challenged it in court, saying that its passage violated the Open Government Act’s requirement that the legislature issue a meeting notice at least seventy-two hours before the meeting. The CNMI Legislature responded by passing another Saipan casino law that complied with the notice requirement.

Since the exclusive US\$2 billion casino license was awarded in July 2014 to Best Sunshine International, now known as Imperial Pacific International, opponents have doubted its viability. For their part, the casino owners have seemed to have a knack for attracting or creating controversies. Imperial Pacific management hired contractors from China who turned out to have brought in construction workers on tourist visas—the “quickest” way, given the federal restrictions on the hiring of guest workers (MV, 29 May 2017). This illegal activity unraveled just as quickly following the accidental death of one of the “tourists” at the casino’s construction site (MV, 3 April 2017). Imperial Pacific then did what it should have done from the get-go: It employed a US contractor who hired H2-B (employment visa) workers (MV, 16 July 2018).

In July 2017, the casino had a “soft

opening” at its still-unfinished hotel in Garapan, where it had relocated from its previous site, an area in nearby T Galleria (*MV*, 7 July 2017). Meanwhile, the remaining Chinese “tourists” hired by Imperial Pacific’s contractors staged protests near the new casino, demanding back wages and additional compensation (*MV*, 13 Dec 2017).

On Guam, the island’s legislative committee on ethics announced that it was launching a full investigation into a complaint against Guam Senator James Espaldon for facilitating a questionable US\$11.5 million generator deal, which the CNMI’s Commonwealth Utilities Corporation (CUC) ultimately had to scrap (*GDP*, 17 May 2017). The controversy over this project also resulted in CNMI Governor Ralph Deleon Guerrero (D L G) Torres’s decision to “ask” CUC board members to resign (*MV*, 15 May 2017).

In the health sector, Esther Muna, chief executive officer of the Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation (CHCC), expressed her desire to evict Pacific Health Inc (PHI), the privately owned pharmacy doing business in the CNMI’s only hospital, the Commonwealth Health Center, if PHI would not agree to a rent increase. But Muna said the governor “disagreed” with the higher amount that CHCC wanted to charge PHI (*MV*, 19 July 2017). Later, the public learned that Muna and the governor had disagreements regarding other hospital management issues.

On 6 August 2017, the CNMI’s youngest governor in history, Ralph D L G Torres, celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday at a well-attended fundraising event at a hotel (*MV*, 7 Aug 2017). A former CNMI House member and

Senate president, Torres was elected lieutenant governor in 2014 and became the CNMI’s chief executive following the death of then-Governor Eloy S Inos, age sixty-six, in December 2015 (*MV*, 30 Dec 2015).

Also in August 2017, North Korea threatened to nuke Guam after US President Trump vowed to meet Pyongyang’s threats “with fire and fury like the world has never seen” (*GDP*, 10 Aug 2017). In response, Governor Torres expressed support for the American president (*MV*, 11 Aug 2017). Back in March 2016, he endorsed Trump ahead of the US Republican Party’s local caucuses to select delegates to the Republican National Convention (*MV*, 14 March 2016). In April 2017, Trump met with the CNMI governor in the Oval Office of the White House. “This is the first governor to endorse me; he is a long time friend,” Trump was quoted as saying. “We need to do what we can to continue the economic growth in the CNMI. Take care of my friend,” the president told his then Chief of Staff Reinhold Priebus (*MV*, 6 April 2017).

In August, the governor signed a US\$20 million measure to pay land compensation owed to several local families (*MV*, 17 Aug 2017). This was among the many long-standing obligations that the government could not afford to pay after the economy crashed in 1998. In 2017, however, the government found a new funding source: the Saipan casino tax payments.

In September, CNMI Settlement Fund Trustee Joyce Tang reported to the federal court that the CNMI government was making weekly payments

of US\$1 million, partly because of increased Saipan casino gross revenue tax collected in 2016 and 2017 (*MV*, 22 Sept 2017). The Settlement Fund was created by the federal court after a global settlement agreement was reached in retiree Berry Johnson's class-action lawsuit against the CNMI Retirement Fund and the CNMI government for its failure to remit its contributions to the pension fund (*MV*, 30 Sept 2013). Under the settlement agreement, the CNMI government was required to pay 75 percent of the retirement benefits, but the additional revenue from the Saipan casino allowed the government to pay 100 percent. As of September 2017, Tang said that there were 3,035 settlement class members, including seventy-two active CNMI government employees. The CNMI Settlement Fund owns a consent judgment totaling US\$779 million, which the fund may enforce against the CNMI government in federal court if the CNMI fails to meet its obligations.

On 26 September 2017, Governor Torres signed the fiscal year (FY) 2018 budget bill, amounting to US\$236 million—the largest in CNMI history (*MV*, 27 Sept 2017). In FY 2017, the budget amounted to US\$212.6 million; in FY 2016, it was US\$183.5 million; in FY 2015, US\$170 million; FY 2014, US\$145.9 million; FY 2013, US\$133.6 million; and FY 2012, US\$120.6 million (CNMI Law Revision Commission). The FY 2019 budget amount? US\$258.1 million (*MV*, 3 April 2018).

When asked about the concern raised by Settlement Fund Trustee Joyce Tang, who warned against the risks of the CNMI government's reliance on the Saipan casino revenue,

the governor said the gaming industry was creating a ripple effect: "Property values are increasing and more tourists are arriving which benefits hotels, restaurants, stores, their suppliers and vendors, building owners, landowners and other businesses. You may say the casino is just one investment but the ripple effect it brings is huge" (*MV*, 28 Sept 2017).

In October, the governor signed another appropriation measure, amounting to US\$1.4 million for the retroactive lump-sum payments owed to 350 active and inactive employees. "[E]ven if the law said we should pay," the governor said, "if the revenue is not available we cannot still pay that obligation If our economy hasn't grown this much there is no way we could meet these obligations" (*MV*, 2 Oct 2017).

On 4 October 2017, the thirty-five-year-old Republican chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means, Representative Angel Aldan Demapan, announced that he was running against incumbent US Congressman Gregorio Camacho Kilili Sablan, a sixty-two-year-old Independent who caucuses with US Democrats (*MV*, 5 Oct 2017). Kilili, as he is known in the Marianas, was elected as the CNMI's first delegate to the US Congress in 2008. He was reelected in 2010, 2012, 2014, and then in 2016 when he, for the first time, ran unopposed. Governor Torres expressed support for Demapan. Backed by a formidable Republican "machinery" that controls the main levers of CNMI government, Demapan is Kilili's toughest opponent yet. But Kilili is also a battle-tested politician with the ability to reach out and create coalitions.

tions that transcend party affiliations. As a political pundit might put it, the winner of the 2018 delegate race could very well be the candidate who receives the most votes.

Also in October, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) reported that the CNMI's real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 28.6 percent in 2016 after increasing only 3.8 percent in 2015 (MV, 17 Oct 2017). According to the BEA, "For comparison, real GDP for the U.S. (excluding the territories) increased 1.5 percent in 2016. Guam increased by 0.4 percent, while American Samoa decreased by 2.5 percent" (MV, 17 Oct 2017). The BEA also noted that this was the largest GDP increase by any US territory since the agency started calculating GDP estimates for the territories in 2002 (MV, 17 Oct 2017).

On 1 November 2017, it was reported that the autonomous CNMI Board of Education (BOE) had fired Education Commissioner Cynthia I Deleon Guerrero, who had been hired the previous year (MV, 1 Nov 2017). Deleon Guerrero was considered a more acceptable education commissioner to the governor compared to her predecessor, Rita A Sablan, who openly supported the opposition ticket in the 2014 gubernatorial election. The BOE, however, indicated that it would not work with Deleon Guerrero. In public, the governor did not raise a fuss over her firing. She was later hired by Northern Marianas College as one of its interim vice presidents (MV, 1 March 2018).

In contrast, the governor went public with his disappointment over the version of Congressman Kilili's H R 339 that became US Public Law

115-53 (MV, 2 Nov 2017). The bill's original draft would have increased the CW-1 cap for FY 2017 to 15,000 from 12,998. The bill was amended by the US Senate to add 350 CW-1 slots only; it also imposed a ban on non-resident construction workers hired through the CW program.

Meanwhile, several politicians who ran as Independents in 2016 joined the Republican Party (MV, 17 Nov 2017). On 19 November 2017, the governor announced that Senate President Arnold Indalecio Palacios would be his running mate (MV, 20 Nov 2017).

A couple of days later, the governor had to be the bearer of bad news: the US Department of Homeland Security-US Citizenship and Immigration Services (DHS-USCIS) had reduced the CW-1 cap for FY 2018 to 9,998 from 12,998 (MV, 22 Nov 2017). The CNMI government and business community had requested DHS-USCIS to reduce the cap by one visa only. But DHS said it was its "legal responsibility to make larger cuts to the CW number" while operating under the law that would end the CW program in December 2019 (MV, 22 Nov 2017). The governor urged "Congressman [Kilili] to work with me and the community to make the extension of the CW program the top priority on his agenda before it is too late" (MV, 22 Nov 2017). He also told Kilili to "stop saying" that he, the governor, supported Kilili's H R 339 (MV, 20 Dec 2017). "What was passed is not what I supported," the governor reiterated, adding, "And the outcome of H.R. 339 has devastated everyone here on island. I am very concerned because those folks that have been on island as construction workers,

gardeners, farmers, maintenance people and [others who] fall under the category of construction workers are now no longer being renewed so H.R. 339 has devastated not only the economy but also people's lives" (MV, 20 Dec 2017).

In December, former Governor Juan Nekai Babauta neither confirmed nor denied that he would run for the islands' top elective post in 2018 (MV, 19 Dec 2017). A former Republican senator and Washington representative, Babauta was governor from 2002 to 2006. He was an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate in 2005, 2009, and 2014. He also ran unsuccessfully for US congressman in 2010.

As 2017 drew to an end, CNMI leaders said it was a good year, despite a looming workforce shortage (MV, 29 Dec 2017).

In January 2018, Governor Torres publicly criticized Esther Muna, chief executive officer of CHCC. He said he was disappointed with Muna for renovating the hospital's new outpatient pharmacy instead of purchasing new pharmacy hoods for its existing inpatient pharmacy (MV, 11 Jan 2018). When the hospital-based outpatient pharmacy opened, the governor was not among the officials who cut the ceremonial ribbon (MV, 12 Jan 2018). According to an e-mail from the chief of staff of the hospital's department of medicine, the governor had told the hospital board to fire Muna (MV, 16 Jan 2018). "As of this time," the doctor said, "they [the hospital board members], being of sound mind, have declined" (MV, 16 Jan 2018). In the CNMI House of Representatives, Republican Vice Speaker Janet Maratita introduced a bill to abolish

the CHCC and to, in its place, reestablish a public health department under the executive branch (MV, 22 Jan 2018). Hospital officials and other key personnel opposed the bill (MV, 29 Jan 2018). PHI Pharmacy, which Muna wanted evicted from the hospital, received a five-year lease extension (MV, 22 Jan 2018). The governor asked Vice Speaker Maratita to recall her bill to abolish CHCC (MV, 2 Feb 2018).

As all of this was happening, the moribund CNMI Democratic Party nominated a former mayor of Rota as its gubernatorial nominee (MV, 22 Jan 2018). Although a former president of the Republican Senate, Joseph Songao Inos, age seventy, was elected Rota mayor in 1993 as a Democrat. He failed in his reelection bid in 1997 but won a second term in 2005 on the slate of the Covenant Party, a splinter group of Republicans. He is the brother of the late former Governor Eloy S Inos, whose running mate in the 2014 elections was Ralph D L G Torres, the incumbent governor.

In February 2018, the Democrats announced that Joseph Songao Inos had withdrawn from the gubernatorial race "for personal and family reasons" (MV, 8 Feb 2018). Most of his family members were with the Republican camp.

In the same month, Bloomberg Businessweek posted a sensational article by Matthew Campbell on its website, which the governor's opponents hoped could change the trajectory of CNMI election-year politics. The synopsis of the article—titled "A Chinese Casino Has Conquered a Piece of America"—said it all: "Construction workers maimed and

killed. Millions paid to the governor's family. An impossibly lucrative gambling operation. And all on U.S. soil" (Campbell 2018). The governor and his allies said it was a politically motivated hit piece (MV, 19 Feb 2018). Among the local sources of the article were critics of the Saipan casino and former Governor Juan Nekai Babauta, who was thinking of running for governor again (MV, 19 Feb 2018).

In March, concerned citizen Jack Muna said that lawmakers and other top officials did not need a pay hike. He was reacting to the passage in the CNMI House of Representatives of two bills that would increase the salaries of executive branch officials and reestablish a special annuity for the governor and lieutenant governor. Muna said that low-income people were "struggling to buy food" while their officials were giving themselves a pay increase (MV, 1 March 2018).

Many in the opposition believed that the proposed pay hikes and the Bloomberg article were potent campaign issues—even as the administration announced the enactment of a US\$24 million supplemental budget and the reduction of the government's long-standing debts, including judgments, to US\$1 million from US\$60 million (MV, 2 March 2018).

On 5 March 2018, the CNMI's first bishop, Tomas A Camacho, passed away. He was eighty-four. A year before, two Guamanian residents had accused the bishop of raping them. His lawyer, William Fitzgerald, told the *Pacific Daily News* at the time: "Everybody in the CNMI loves Bishop Camacho and everybody's shocked, including the bishop himself about the allegations. His health is not good. He

basically lives by himself, but people take care of him" (PDN, 5 March 2018). The lawyer also said the allegations against the bishop "date back to nearly 50 years ago, making it hard to find witnesses who were present during the period alleged in the cases" (PDN, 5 March 2018).

As the year went on, there was more bad news for the CNMI. Despite pending legislation in the US Congress that would extend the CW program and increase the CW-1 cap, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that the CW cap for FY 2019 would be 4,999. The FY 2018 cap was 9,998 (MV, 22 March 2018). USCIS also said it would conduct a lottery for the FY 2019 CW-1 applications (MV, 13 April 2018). Congressman Kilili said that the "Trump administration's decision" was "terrible for the CNMI economy" and a "slap in the face of everyone in the Marianas who made the effort and expense to send CW applications" (MV, 17 April 2018). He also said that the CNMI government was "sitting on \$22.5 million that should be going to families in the Marianas who need help putting food on the table" (MV, 23 March 2018). This provoked a spirited rebuttal from Department of Community and Cultural Affairs Secretary Robert H Hunter, who accused Kilili of playing "petty politics" (MV, 23 March 2018). Before the end of March, US Senator Lisa Murkowski, the Republican chairwoman of the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which has jurisdiction over the territories, visited Saipan and Tinian. Senator Murkowski had introduced the CNMI Workforce Bill, which she said was likely to be signed

by President Trump if passed by both houses of the US Congress (MV, 28 March 2018).

In April, former Governor Juan N Babauta, age sixty-three, announced his independent gubernatorial bid with former Education Commissioner Rita A Sablan, age sixty-one, as his running mate. Babauta said that he and Sablan “believe that the time has come to direct the path of the Commonwealth in the right direction” (MV, 13 April 2018). Babauta’s wife is the sister of Governor Torres’s wife.

Early in May, the Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation said that its CW-1 petitions for over 100 nurses were rejected by USCIS (MV, 17 May 2018).

On 21 May 2018, another beloved CNMI figure passed away. The Commonwealth’s longest serving and only three-term governor, Pedro “Teno” Pangelinan Tenorio, was eighty-four. CNMI, regional, and US officials, as well as local politicians on both sides of the aisle, paid tribute to Teno’s accomplishments and record as public servant (MV, 22 May 2018).

In June, Saipan’s casino investor, Imperial Pacific International, sued Bloomberg and its reporters for defamation. The lawsuit was filed in Hong Kong (MV, 11 June 2018).

Following the enactment of the CNMI Workforce Bill in July (MV, 26

July 2018), which promised to ensure that the Commonwealth will continue to have access to the workers it needs, all eyes turned to the ever-changing local political scene and the fast-approaching November elections.

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