

## Political Reviews

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*The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2020*

NIC MACLELLAN

*Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2020*

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## VANUATU

Events in Vanuatu in 2020 were dominated by the national general elections, natural disasters, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), and the controversies surrounding the fortieth independence anniversary celebrations.

A total of 231 candidates contested the national general elections for fifty-two seats in the twelfth legislature of Parliament (Malapa 2020a). On 19 March, over 278,000 voters cast their votes at 352 polling stations, where they saw a strong presence of observer groups representing both diplomatic missions and political parties (*Daily Post* 2020h). For the first time in the nation's history, the official counting of the ballots was streamed live on Facebook, which made the process both transparent and accessible

to viewing by third parties (Malapa 2020b).

Twenty-five former members of Parliament from the eleventh legislature were reelected, including Christophe Emelee (Torres constituency); Jay Ngwele (Ambae constituency); Bruno Leingkone (Ambrym constituency); Ian Wilson (Maewo constituency); Gillion William and Jack Norris (Efate Rural constituency); Matai Seremaiah and Mark Ati (Luganville constituency); Marcellino Barthelemy, Gracia Shadrack, Esmon Saimon, and John Sala (Malekula constituency); Silas Bule and Charlot Salwai (Pentecost constituency); Ralph Regenvanu, Alatoi Ishmael Kalsakau, and Kenneth Natapei (Port Vila constituency); Samson Samsen, Alfred Maoh, and Gaetan Pikioune (Santo Rural constituency); and Jotham Napat, Andrew Napuat, Johnny Koanapo, Bob Loughman Weibeur, and Nako Natuman (Tanna constituency). Two members of Parliament from the tenth legislature—Bakoa Kaltonga (Efate Rural constituency) and James Bule (Ambae constituency)—secured their seats again after having lost them in the previous general election for the eleventh legislature in 2016.

Former Prime Minister Joe Natuman saw his application to be declared an eligible candidate for the 2020 general elections quashed by the Supreme Court. He had submitted the application on 28 January 2020 after the Electoral Commission had written him a letter advising him that he was disqualified for contesting in the general elections pursuant to section 24 (1) (b) of the Representation of the People's Act [CAP 146] (G Willie

2020a). Previously, in March 2018, Natuman was serving as deputy prime minister when he was given a two-year suspended sentence by the Supreme Court after pleading guilty to a charge of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice (Tahana 2018).

Former Prime Ministers Ham Lini and Sato Kilman both lost their seats to new candidates from the Graonmo Jastis Pati (GJP), Ephraim Boe Reve and Edmond Julun. They each secured just over seven hundred votes, which was not enough to secure a seat. GJP's strategy was to field fewer candidates than other political parties and consolidate their voters toward a winning majority. This proved to be a smart move, and from their fifteen candidates who contested the general elections, they gained nine elected members of Parliament. The Leaders Party of Vanuatu and Vanua'aku Pati fielded twenty-five and twenty-seven candidates, respectively, but they only gained seven elected members of Parliament each (R Willie 2020).

Vanua'aku Pati's president and MP for Tanna constituency, Bob Loughman Weibur, was elected by Parliament as prime minister on 20 April. He defeated GJP's president and MP for Port Vila constituency, Regenvanu, 31–21. When Parliament convened to vote through secret ballot, there were thirty MPs from the Vanua'aku Pati, the Union of the Moderate Parties, the National United Party, the Nagriamel political movement, the Green Confederation Party, and other political groups on one side of the chamber. On the other side were twenty-two MPs from GJP, Reunification of Movement for Change, the Leaders Party of Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Liberal Movement,

and other groups (Ligo, Malapa, and Kalsakau 2020a).

Interestingly, outgoing Prime Minister Charlot Salwai Tabimasmamas did not contest for the top post but instead nominated GJP's Regenvanu as a candidate for the prime minister position, while Vanua'aku Pati's Loughman was nominated by outgoing Opposition leader and MP for Port Vila Constituency Ishmael Kalsakau. Kalsakau was later appointed deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs, and other appointed cabinet members included Willie Daniel (minister for agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries and biosecurity); Johnny Koanapo Rasou (minister for finance); Silas Bule (minister for health); Bruno Lengkon (minister for climate change, meteorology and geohazards); Jack Norris Kalmet (minister for lands); Willie Pakoa Saatearoto (minister for youth and sports development); Esmon Saimon (minister for justice and community services); Marc Ati (minister for foreign affairs and external trade); Simeon Davidson Seoule (minister for education); and Jay Ngwele (minister for infrastructure and public utilities). Graciano Shadrack also defected from the Leaders Party of Vanuatu to join the government side when he was appointed as Speaker of Parliament (Ligo, Malapa, and Kalsakau 2020b).

Outgoing Prime Minister Tabimasmamas was later put on trial in November for charges of corruption and perjury after pleading not guilty in the Supreme Court in September to ten counts of bribery and corruption and one count of perjury. The charges followed complaints made by Deputy Prime Minister Kalsakau when he was Opposition leader. In

the filed complaints, Kalsakau alleged that his 2016 motion of no confidence against Salwai failed due to bribery. Former Minister of Agriculture Matai Seremaiah, former Minister of Health Jerome Ludvane, and former MP Tomker Netvunei also pleaded not guilty to bribery charges connected to the case (Willie and Malapa 2020).

Later in December, the Supreme Court found all four defendants not guilty of the corruption and bribery charges, but Salwai was found guilty of perjury because he misled the court when he said the Council of Ministers had approved a decision to create parliamentary secretary positions. He later appealed his suspended sentence of two years and three months (Willie 2021), but the appeal was dismissed by Chief Justice Vincent Lunabek in May 2021, triggering an upcoming by-election in the Pentecost constituency to find his replacement (Bule 2021).

The new government led by Prime Minister Loughman maintained Vanuatu's historical stance to support West Papua's struggle for independence. In his speech to the United Nations (UN) in September, Loughman spoke in favor of self-determination and human rights in West Papua, and Indonesia was quick to lash back, accusing Vanuatu of failing to respect the UN charter's principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of other countries (RNZ 2020). However, Vanuatu's staunch support of West Papua's independence bid is based on the core principles of self-determination and nonalignment. These values have consistently guided how Vanuatu conducts its foreign relations since independence (Kaiku 2019).

Vanuatu faced three major disasters

in 2020: Tropical Cyclone Harold, volcanic ashfall on Tanna Island, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Three deaths and fifty-six injuries were reported in Vanuatu as a result of Tropical Cyclone Harold, a category five cyclone that passed through four countries—Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga—during the first week of April. The reported deaths and injuries resulted from the collapse of buildings, fallen objects, wind-strewn debris, drownings, and preexisting illnesses (*Daily Post* 2020g). The last category five cyclone in Vanuatu was Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015. In addition to Tropical Cyclone Harold, Yasur Volcano experienced increased activity in 2020, including “ongoing explosions and volcanic stem plumes from eruptive vents” (Roberts 2020a). The resulting continuous ashfall left over twenty-eight thousand people from communities in the southeastern, central, and northeastern parts of Tanna in need of immediate food assistance from the government (Roberts 2020a).

On 26 March 2020, the president of Vanuatu signed a declaration for a two-week state of emergency, citing the need to strengthen prevention and containment measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A national coronavirus task force had already been working around the clock since 10 March to establish isolation wards at the Vila Central Hospital and the Northern District Hospital (Roberts 2020b), but the task force was dissolved on 20 March. The state of emergency was extended multiple times for the dual purposes of continuing COVID-19 prevention and containment measures and responding to Tropical Cyclone Harold. Eventually,

it was extended to 31 December 2020. The state of emergency allowed for special powers under the Disaster Risk Management Act No 23 of 2019 to be utilized.

Planning and coordination mechanisms were immediately activated during the state of emergency. The National Disaster Management Office assumed all national coordination, including intersectoral coordination and response management. A national cluster system—including an inter-cluster and eight technical clusters (education; emergency telecommunications; food security and agriculture; gender and protection; health and nutrition; logistics; shelter; and water, sanitation, and hygiene)—was also responsible for coordinating within and between sectors. A Health Incident Management Team and several hospital and provincial health emergency operation centers were established to manage day-to-day health-sector operations in facilities and provinces, and the Ministry of Health created a website to share important COVID-19 updates (Vanuatu Ministry of Health 2020). Other important non-health updates in relation to Tropical Cyclone Harold and the Tanna ashfall were shared regularly on the National Disaster Management Office’s website.

In April, the Vanuatu government announced a 4 billion vatu (VT, about US\$37 million) budget to stimulate the economy and a VT125 million (US\$1.14 million) budget for COVID-19 measures (Roberts, Kalsakau, and Malapa 2020). The government’s stimulus package included deferring taxes such as road taxes, work permits fees, business license fees (except for commercial banks), residence permit

charges, and rent tax. It also included employment and small business subsidies to provide much-needed operational budgets to affected businesses and minimum wages to laid-off workers (*Daily Post* 2020i). A separate budget of VT125 million was also announced to help families affected by Tropical Cyclone Harold and to cover COVID-19 measures (Roberts, Kalsakau, and Malapa 2020).

Donor partners were also quick to announce their own assistance packages. In March, the Chinese government announced a US\$100,000 (VT10.7 million) package to support Vanuatu's efforts to prevent and control COVID-19 (*Daily Post* 2020b). In April, a charter flight from China arrived, bringing essential medical supplies, including thirty-one ventilators, fifty detection kits, three hundred units of disposable protective clothing for medical use, 130 forehead thermometers, two thousand N95 masks, and twenty thousand disposable surgical masks. The delivery of the medical supplies complied with strict COVID-19 protocols (*Daily Post* 2020c).

In April, Australia also announced its VT310 million (US\$2.9 million) assistance package, which went toward the delivery of humanitarian items for the Tropical Cyclone Harold response program. These included solar lanterns, bed nets, and hygiene, shelter, and kitchen kits. The delivery of these items complied with strict COVID-19 protocols, with the Australian Defence Force adopting additional measures, such as wearing protective equipment, providing medical clearances, disinfecting equipment and supplies, and practicing physical distancing at all times. Additional assistance was provided in the form of support

to the National Disaster Management Office and the Vanuatu Red Cross to distribute pre-positioned relief items, additional equipment to the Vanuatu Police Force, and staff for conducting rapid assessments (Roberts and Kalsakau 2020).

New Zealand announced its VT220 million (US\$2 million) assistance package in May, which was earmarked to support the Vanuatu government's stimulus packages. These packages were geared toward keeping people in employment, providing grants to small and medium businesses, supplementing fees for university students, subsidizing commodity producers, and supporting shipping services (*Daily Post* 2020e).

The first COVID-19 case was announced by Prime Minister Loughman in November. The island of Efate was placed on lockdown while all passengers who returned on the same repatriation flight as the COVID-19 patient were tested according to the surveillance and tracing protocols. The case was cleared after a month (Willie, Roberts, and Ligo 2020).

Vanuatu's repatriation program saw over five thousand overseas-based citizens and residents return to Vanuatu and undergo strict COVID-19 protocols to ensure further testing of any suspected cases and isolation and quarantine of any confirmed cases. Russell Tamata, director general of the Ministry of Health, said that this was the highest number of repatriates in the region, and out of these, there was only one confirmed case of COVID-19. This was only possible thanks to the strong COVID-19 protocols and containment measures that had been put in place to prevent importation of the virus (Roberts 2021).

As a result of COVID-19 and the border closure in late March, businesses in Vanuatu reported a fall in revenues by 46 percent in December 2020 (VCCI 2020). The Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industries has continued to advocate for the government to continue its stimulus package into 2021 to support a wage subsidy program and a small business stimulus package program and to make the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out a priority. The government also announced a surplus of VT7.1 billion (US\$64 million) at the end of 2020, so, given that the cost of the two stimulus programs would total VT150 million (US\$1.4 million) per month, it would be feasible to implement the scheme to support the livelihoods of the people of Vanuatu who have been affected by the economic downturn.

The government budget of VT57 billion (US\$520 million) for 2020 (Ligo 2019) also funded some eyebrow-raising activities given the disasters Vanuatu faced, such as the reacquisition of eighty-two state titles that had been given out illegally by former Minister of Lands Steven Kalsakau in 2012, amounting to VT1 billion (US\$9.13 million) (Joshua 2020); the nationwide celebrations to mark the fortieth independence anniversary, worth VT100 million (US\$913,000) (Abel 2020); and the two-day celebrations to mark Vanuatu's graduation from the least developing country category, worth VT37 million (US\$338,000) (Willie 2020b).

On a positive note, major infrastructure projects funded in 2020 included the VT400 million (US\$3.7 million) Freshwota Stadium, funded by FIFA (Bule 2020); the VT61 million

(US\$557,000) upgrade of the Independence Park grandstand, funded by the Vanuatu government (Roberts 2020c); the new correctional facility for female inmates (*Daily Post* 2020d), which was part of New Zealand funding worth VT920 million (US\$8.4 million) toward correctional facilities around Vanuatu (Shing 2020); and the new Supreme Court Hall of Justice, worth over VT1 billion (US\$9.13 million), of which Australia contributed VT240 million (US\$2.2 million) and New Zealand contributed VT227 million (US\$2.08 million) (*Daily Post* 2020f).

The government also announced in June that it would focus more on the productive sector to boost the economy in light of the impacts of COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone Harold, with over 21 percent of the 2021 budget going toward that sector (*Daily Post* 2020a). The 2021 budget has been set at VT52 billion (US\$475 million), which is less than the 2020 budget of VT57 billion (Ligo 2020). Overall, 2020 was a difficult year that saw a newly elected government face the challenges of navigating Vanuatu's economy through COVID-19 and two natural disasters. It will be interesting to see how the government's policy to focus more on the productive sector can improve the economic situation in 2021.

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