

Political Reviews

*Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2015
to 30 June 2016*

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MARSHALL ISLANDS

For the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the period under review saw the passing of several traditional and political leaders and distinguished community members. Most notable was the death of Iroojlaplap (Paramount Chief), Senator, and former President Jurelang Zedkaia, who suffered a fatal heart attack in October 2015. In addition to overseeing landholding across Mājro (Majuro) Atoll as its traditional leader, Zedkaia served in the Nitijeļā (Parliament) for twenty-four years and as the nation's president from 2009 to 2012 after he was elected to replace Litokwa Tomeing, who had been removed from office by a vote of no confidence. Zedkaia was honored with a month of national mourning and a state funeral attended by thousands (*MIJ*, 16 Oct 2015). Several other high-ranking irooj (chiefs) and former members of the Nitijeļā also passed during this period. Among these was Mājro Irooj and former Senator Wilfred Kendall, who died in January 2016 after a long illness. Kendall's political career

spanned several decades and included accomplishments such as being elected repeatedly to the Congress of Micronesia, serving as minister of education under the late President Amata Kabua and subsequent administrations, and acting as the longest-serving RMI ambassador to the United Nations (*MIJ*, 29 Jan 2016).

Other deaths included Kuwajleen Aļap (lineage head) and former Senator Sato Maie, former Arņo Senator Katip Paul Mack, and Rien Morris, who represented Jālwōj in the Nitijeļā for twenty years. The Kōle/Pikinni/Ejit (KBE) community also lost two leaders. Nishma Jamore, KBE mayor and outspoken advocate of relocating the KBE community to the US continent, died of apparent complications from kidney disease in August 2015, while Marilyn Lokebol succumbed to cancer in June 2016, just a few months after her first-time election as KBE councilwoman. Two respected religious leaders also passed away: United Church of Christ (UCC) Pastor Wendell Langrine of Tucson, Arizona, died in August 2015 during a church conference in Mājro, and Jone Masivou, who came to the Marshall Islands from Fiji as an Assembly of God missionary and founded the Morning Star Church in Mājro in 1995, died in April 2016. Other beloved community members who were lost include Neimon Philippo, wife of former Lae Atoll Senator Tipne Philippo; former v7AB radio announcer Waston Attari; Majuro Middle School special education teacher Asmon Langidrik Jr; and Youth to Youth in Health Director Aluka Rakin. Robert Reimer's only daughter Minna Pihno, who managed key aspects of Robert Reimers Enter-

prises, Inc (RRE) for decades, succumbed to cancer in February 2016.

The period under review was also one of unprecedented transformation in the realm of politics and leadership at the national and local levels, with the most dramatic events unfolding around the November 2015 elections. These included the controversial Nitijeļā campaign by former Peace Corps volunteer Jack Niedenthal; the death of Mājro Atoll Nitijeļā incumbent Iroojlaplap Jurelang Zedkaia; the mobilization of the “youth” vote in favor of several younger, first-time senators; the record election of three woman senators as well as several woman mayors and members of local councils; a vote of no confidence just two weeks after the Nitijeļā’s selection of first-time Senator Casten Nemra of Jālwōj as president; and the subsequent election of Senator Hilda Heine of Aur as the first woman head of state in the RMI or any independent Pacific Island nation (not including New Zealand and Australia). While the election results have inspired some Marshall Islanders to anticipate positive changes for their communities and for their country as a whole, many continue to experience the negative effects of extreme poverty, limited access to health care and other essential services, a floundering education system, extreme weather events, and financial mismanagement at the local and national levels. It remains to be seen whether the new administration and the Constitutional Convention scheduled to take place in late 2016 will bring about the desired changes.

The 2015 election season went into full swing in October 2015 when the attorney general’s office

dropped its appeal of a high court ruling that allowed naturalized citizen Jack Niedenthal to stand for election to the Nitijeļā. In late 2014, the RMI Electoral Administration barred Niedenthal from running for office on the grounds that he does not have a Marshallese parent or a traditional jowi (matriclan). When Attorney General Nathan Brechtefeld upheld the decision, Niedenthal and his attorney, David Strauss, brought the matter to the high court, arguing that the RMI Constitution authorizes any qualified voter over the age of twenty-one to run for office. In February 2015, the high court ruled on behalf of Niedenthal, declaring null and void the section of the Marshall Islands Elections and Referenda Act 1980 that prescribed eligibility qualifications for candidates beyond age and citizenship. The attorney general’s office moved to appeal the decision in the RMI Supreme Court but dropped the request after Assistant Attorney General Rosalie Konou retired in September 2015, allowing the high court’s decision in favor of Niedenthal to stand and his campaign to move forward. The issue of eligibility requirements for election to public office will be addressed at the impending Constitutional Convention; in April 2016, Mile Senator and Minister of Education Wilbur Heine proposed a bill to amend the constitution so that “any person who is qualified to be a candidate must have land rights by birth and be a natural born citizen” (*MIJ*, 22 April 2016).

The run-up to the election took another dramatic turn when, just weeks before Election Day, Iroojlaplap and incumbent Senator Jurelang

Zedkaia of Mājro died suddenly. As Zedkaia had served in the Nitijeļā for more than two decades and was almost assured reelection, his death opened the Mājro electoral field significantly. When all the votes were counted, the results in Mājro and around the nation were extraordinary, with fourteen out of thirty-three Nitijeļā seats changing hands. Incumbents who lost their seats included Speaker of the Nitijeļā Donald Capelle of Likiep, Vice Speaker Caios Lucky of Ujae, and five cabinet ministers including Minister of Foreign Affairs Tony deBrum of Kuwajleen, Minister of Health Phillip Muller of Mājro, Minister of Resources and Development Michael Konelios of Maļoelap, Minister of Justice Rien Morris of Jālwōj, and Minister of Public Works Hiroshi Yamamura of Utrōk. Incumbents Jiba Kabua of Arņo and Jeban Riklon of Kuwajleen were also defeated. Mājro Senator David Kramer, who held on to his seat, cited the losses as evidence that the people of the Marshall Islands “want change and new directions for the RMI” (*MIJ*, 27 Nov 2015).

The desire for a new direction for the Marshall Islands was further substantiated by the impressive lineup of newly elected senators, several of whom campaigned on a “voice of youth” platform promising fresh leadership and positive change for the future (*MIJ*, 27 Nov 2015). Victors in the “youth” camp included Sherwood Tibon and Kalani Kaneko of Mājro, David Paul of Kuwajleen, Bruce Bili-mon of Maļoelap, and Casten Nemra of Jālwōj. Of particular note were first-time candidates Sherwood Tibon and Kalani Kaneko, who came in first and fifth, respectively, in the race

for Mājro’s five Nitijeļā seats and whose victories signaled not just voter discontent but also a youthful shift in voter demographics. In Kuwajleen, David Paul’s victory coincided with the defeat of Tony deBrum, a career politician and prominent international activist. DeBrum’s efforts over the past several years to bring international attention to the negative impacts of climate change and nuclear proliferation on small island nations such as the Marshall Islands left some constituents on Ebjā (Ebeye) Island and other parts of Kuwajleen Atoll wondering how his efforts on the global stage have benefited them at home. Over the past year alone, Ebjā residents grappled with high rates of poverty, inadequate housing, insufficient educational opportunities, severe flooding, power outages, and other challenges (*MIJ*, 27 Nov 2015).

The “youth” victory was not the only surprising outcome of the 2015 election; an unprecedented number of women also took office at the national and local levels. Significantly, three women gained seats in the Nitijeļā, the most to ever hold office at one time—with incumbent Hilda Heine retaining her seat, Daisy Alik-Momotaro of Jālwōj defeating incumbent Rien Morris, and former Senator Amenta Matthew of Utrōk regaining her seat after losing it to Hiroshi Yamamura in 2011. Several women also won mayoral seats; among these were Rufina Jack of Aelok, incumbent Ione deBrum of Epoon, and Veronica Wase of Likiep. In addition, several communities elected women to serve as representatives on their local councils; among these were Betty Tibon-Imaikta of Mājro, Stacey Samuel of Mājro,

and Marilyn Lokebol of KBE. Other historic results included the election of the Nitijeļā's first-ever mother-and-son pair Amenta Matthew and Sherwood Tibon, husband and wife Dennis Momotaro of Mājeļ and Daisy Alik-Momotaro, and three members of the Heine family: Hilda Heine, Wilbur Heine of Mile, and Thomas Heine of Lae. The Heine family and the "youth" coalition would prove fateful for the next series of shake-ups to rock national governance at the highest level.

Because the RMI has a mixed parliamentary-presidential system, the president of the Marshall Islands is elected by the Nitijeļā rather than directly by voters. The election of a new executive was therefore the first and most important task of the Nitijeļā after being sworn in on 4 January 2016. With no well-defined or permanent political parties in the Marshall Islands, the selection of president is usually tied to members' allegiance to particular senators or their island(s) of origin or chiefly status. By the time of the swearing in, three coalitions had emerged among the newly elected senators: one known simply as the "current government" alliance, a conglomeration of largely defunct political parties led by Irooj and Kuwajleen Senator Michael Kabua and incumbent President and Aelōñļapļap Senator Christopher Loeak; the KEA (Kien Eo Aṃ or "Your Government") party led by Alvin Jacklick, who was previously a senator for Jālwōj but was elected this term from Kuwajleen; and a new coalition known initially as the "Solid Six" made up of newly elected "youth" Senators Alfred Alfred Jr of

Aelōñļapļap, Jejwarick Anton of Arṃo, Bruce Bilimon, Casten Nemra, David Paul, and Sherwood Tibon. After gaining a few additional members after the election, the Solid Six became known simply as the "Solids."

With seventeen votes needed and no one coalition boasting a sufficient number of adherents, a joint coalition was required to garner enough votes to elect a president. Knowing this, several senators initiated a series of coalition-building meetings in early December; by Christmas, the KEA's Alvin Jacklick announced that a "Coalition Government" had been created aligning the KEA and the Solids with enough votes to elect a president; the coalition came to be known as the "opposition coalition" because members were united primarily in their goal of opposing incumbent President Christopher Loeak and his administration and allies (*MIJ*, 25 Dec 2015). Potential opposition coalition nominees for the presidency included Alvin Jacklick (KEA), David Kramer (KEA), Tony Muller of Mājro (KEA), former President Litokwa Tomeing of Mājro (KEA), Casten Nemra (Solids), and Kessai Note (unaffiliated). Jacklick confirmed that the opposition coalition's presidential pick would allocate cabinet appointments evenly, with five going to members of the KEA and five to the Solids; in addition, the Speaker of the Nitijeļā would come from the KEA and the vice speaker from the Solids. Faced with this opposition coalition, the current government had to gain the allegiance of members of the KEA or the Solids to maintain any possibility of holding on to the presidency. Hoping to return the current government to power

despite the odds, Senator Michael Kabua quickly sought allies to join him in nominating a president. Possible current government contenders included Hilda Heine, David Kabua, and incumbent President Christopher Loeak. Given the numbers amassed by the KEA/Solids coalition, however, it seemed unlikely going into the election that the current government would prevail. But there were more surprises to come.

At the first meeting of the Nitijeļā on 4 January, Senator Michael Kabua stunned everyone by choosing Casten Nemra of the opposition coalition as the current government's nominee for president. Nemra had been considered for nomination by the opposition in a primary ten days earlier but had lost out to Alvin Jacklick. By choosing a candidate who would draw support from the Solids and later owe allegiance to the current government for putting him in power, Kabua had bested the opposition. In the end, Nemra prevailed: he narrowly defeated Jacklick by a vote of 17 to 16. Meanwhile, the opposition successfully nominated Kenneth Kedi of Roņļap as Speaker and Jejwarick Anton as vice speaker of the Nitijeļā; their successful election (both won 19 to 14) brought another first to the Nitijeļā: the first time the president and Speaker and vice speaker were from two different coalitions. President Nemra quickly found himself in a tenuous position: not only did he not have the full support of his Speaker and vice speaker, but he would also find it difficult to select a cabinet agreeable to both sides. Within just a week of Nemra's election to the nation's highest office, rumors were

circulating about a possible vote of no confidence (*MIJ*, 15 Jan 2016).

A week after the election, Casten Nemra was inaugurated as the seventh president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The first-time senator and former chief secretary (2008–2015) was the youngest person and only the second non-irooj ever elected to the presidency (Kessai Note was the first). Prior to the inauguration, Nemra faced the challenge of naming his cabinet ministers; caught between the opposition coalition of which he had been a member and the current government coalition that had brought him to power, Nemra found it difficult to select a lineup acceptable to both sides. The result was a partial cabinet list with a few picks from each faction and several conspicuous omissions: not only were the minister of education and minister of health posts left vacant, but Hilda Heine, Wilbur Heine, and Thomas Heine—who had all served as ministers during Christopher Loeak's administration and had presumably supported Nemra's election—were not named on the cabinet list. The omission of Hilda Heine, whom many regard as uniquely qualified as minister of education because she has a doctorate in education and served as minister of education under President Loeak, was particularly unexpected. Apparently, however, Hilda Heine and Wilbur Heine refused their nominations because their cousin and incumbent Minister of Justice Thomas Heine was not nominated for a cabinet post; President Nemra instead named Ujae Senator and former Attorney General Atbi Riklon to the minister of justice post. In response, all three Heine senators

boycotted President Nemra's inauguration ceremony and were soon after reported to be in conversation with the opposition coalition; meanwhile, several KEA/Solids followers turned down cabinet appointments and asked the president to form a cabinet of "national unity" representing all three coalitions (*MIJ*, 15 Jan 2016). Nemra's rejection of the suggestion, the defection of the Heine contingent to the opposition, and the 22 January resignation of Mike Halferty of Arŋo from his post as minister of transportation and communication after only eleven days all signaled that a vote of no confidence was looming.

Three days after Senator Halferty vacated his ministerial post and just fourteen days after President Nemra's election, Senator John Silk of Epoon introduced a vote of no confidence on the grounds that neither President Nemra nor his government had a mandate from the Nitijelā or from the people of the Marshall Islands; what's more, the president did not have a fully functioning cabinet and thus could not move the government or the nation forward. Although the motion was strongly opposed by several senators—including President Nemra, Michael Kabua, and former President Kessai Note—on the grounds that the new president had not had sufficient time to form alliances or put forth a strong agenda, the opposition called for the body to reconvene the next day for a vote. Following a short twenty-four-hour recess and a call to vote, President Casten Nemra was removed from office by a successful vote of no confidence (21 to 12)—the second successful vote out of eight such motions since 1998—making

Nemra not just the youngest but also the shortest-serving president in the history of the RMI.

Although section 7 of the RMI Constitution allows the Nitijelā fourteen days to elect a new president following a successful vote of no confidence, Senator David Kramer made a motion for the election to take place the next day, 27 January, and the motion passed. Soon after dispersing for the day, the opposition coalition met to decide on a nominee to replace Nemra. On 27 January 2016, the opposition coalition, including members of the KEA, the Solids, and several current government defectors, nominated Hilda Heine as the next president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; a vote was called and Dr Heine won with 24 of 30 total votes. Six senators abstained; three of these, including current government leaders Irooj Senator Michael Kabua and Irooj Senator Christopher Loeak, were noticeably absent.

Hilda Heine's election as the eighth president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands was historic in several ways, not the least of which is that she is the first woman president of the Marshall Islands or any independent Pacific Island nation. President Heine was inaugurated on 28 January 2016, just one day after her election, and named her cabinet ministers within a few days. Although the Speaker and vice speaker of the Nitijelā remained in place, President Heine's cabinet lineup differed significantly from that of her immediate predecessor; in fact, the only returning minister was Senator Mike Halferty, who had resigned his post under President Nemra after eleven days, in what was perhaps a

strategic move on his part to retain the post under the next administration. Other appointments included Senator John Silk as minister of foreign affairs; President Heine's cousins Wilbur and Thomas as ministers of education and justice, respectively; and members of the original "Solid Six," including Alfred Alfred Jr as minister of resources and development and Kalani Kaneko as minister of health. David Paul, also an original Solid Sixer, was President Heine's initial pick for minister of finance; Senator Paul declined the post, however, on the grounds that he wanted to focus on "get[ting] things going at Kwajalein, to improve Ebeye," which was what he said he was primarily elected to do (*MIJ*, 5 Feb 2016). In Senator Paul's stead, President Heine appointed Senator Brenson Wase of Mājro, who previously held the minister of finance post under President Kessai Note. Neither Senator Daisy Alik-Momotaro (who defected from the opposition to the current government and was appointed minister of internal affairs under President Nemra) nor her husband Senator Dennis Momotaro, (who previously served as Minister of Transportation and Communication and Minister of Finance) received a cabinet appointment.

As of this writing, it remains to be seen whether President Heine and the new administration will succeed in addressing the many challenges their local and national constituents face on a daily basis. Some of the most significant troubles that arose during the period under review include a series of weather-related events that had dramatic local and national consequences: Typhoon Nangka, which

swept through Ānewetak Atoll and other areas in early July 2015, causing widespread damage totaling \$9.4 million and food and water shortages that lasted several months in some areas (*MIJ*, 27 Nov 2015); a severe drought caused by the El Niño Southern Oscillation that brought Mājro water reserves to a two-year low (*MIJ*, 20 May 2016) and led US President Barack Obama to issue a Presidential Disaster Declaration to make "federal funding available for U.S. Government emergency relief and reconstruction assistance" (The White House 2016); extensive damage caused by king tides and storm surges on Mājro, Kōle, Ebjā, and other areas in October 2015 and March 2016; and impending sea-level rise and loss of land area due to climate change and global warming. Other continuing challenges include the lingering legacies of nuclear testing: the reported deterioration of Runit Dome on Ānewetak Atoll, which contains approximately 111,000 cubic yards of radioactive debris (Jose, Wall, and Hinzl 2015); the RMI's ongoing lawsuits against several nuclear-armed states; and a KBE resolution to seek US government legislation that would allow the people of Bikinni to use money from the Resettlement Trust Fund for the People of Bikini to relocate to the United States.

In an effort to chart a new course and find solutions to these and other challenges threatening the future of the RMI, the Nitijeļā unanimously adopted Bill 70 in September 2015 requiring that a Constitutional Convention (Con-Con) be held. In May 2016, the Pre-Constitutional Convention Committee informed Presi-

dent Heine that an election to select representatives to the Con-Con will take place on 11 October 2016, and the convention will commence within sixty days of the election. The Con-Con will have a total of 45 members: 33 elected from Nitijeļā districts and 12 irooj selected by consensus to represent the various island groups. Many Marshall Islanders are looking to the Con-Con to resolve a number of structural matters they believe are negatively impacting their lives and livelihoods; as the 2015 election cycle revealed, the procedure for electing the country's chief executive and the rules for who can represent them in public office are perhaps among the most pressing. Depending on the convention's outcome, 2015 may have been the first and last election in which a naturalized citizen without land rights by birth could run for the Nitijeļā and the last time Marshall Islanders were denied the right to vote directly for president.

Widespread support for the impending Con-Con is just one more indication that the people of the Marshall Islands want change and new directions for their nation. It also reveals that, as Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa so aptly noted, Marshall Islanders do not just "live day to day, not really caring for the long-term benefits" and outcomes of their actions and decisions, but rather "plan for generations, for the continuity and improvement of their families and kin groups" (Hau'ofa 1994, 159). In the coming months, they can only hope that their elected and traditional leaders will do the same.

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REPUBLIC OF PALAU

The period under review was one that brought about landmark policies and historic moments for the Republic of Palau and for its leadership, including issues related to infrastructure development, climate change, and the ocean. The year brought together both elected and traditional leaders to address issues regarding the welfare of the people. It was also a time of transition as important leaders who had contributed greatly to the country's national development passed on and others stepped into the political scene to lead as Palau contin-