

the 2000 coup had been able to exercise over Sogavare and his ministerial colleagues and that had contributed in significant ways to the deepening political and economic crisis. The composition of the newly-formed government suggested that this was unlikely to happen and subsequent developments have borne this out. There has been a reluctance to take hard decisions and a readiness to follow the path of least resistance. The coercive arm of the state – the police force – remains incapacitated and serious crimes, including murder, go unpunished. In large parts of rural Guadalcanal, the rule of law has effectively collapsed and been replaced by brutal family feuds waged between former ethnic allies. As funds for wages and services dry up, the arrival of compensation from Taiwan generates a feeding frenzy among claimants (genuine and bogus) and inevitably leads to further divisions and conflict. Disenchantment with the formal political process has now reached dangerous new levels.

CONVERGING ON THE ARC OF INSTABILITY? THE FALL OF BARAK SOPE AND THE SPECTRE OF A COUP IN VANUATU

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The constitutional crisis which erupted in Vanuatu in May 2001 initially prompted fears that Vanuatu might follow the examples of the Solomon Islands and Fiji and descend into social unrest, and possibly violent conflict. The greater danger was that the ailing administration of Barak Tame Sope Mau'utamate would mobilize the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) to consolidate its hold on power.

The crisis was triggered by an attempted motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Barak Sope, authored jointly by the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) and Sope's former coalition partner, the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP). The pressing issue for the Vanua'aku Pati was the country's worsening financial situation, especially in light of a clandestine deal between Sope and Indian Thai businessman Amerendra Nath Ghosh, involving the issue of \$US300 million from the Reserve Bank. The UMP had defected to the opposition in the month before the commencement of the parliamentary session. For almost two months during its scheduled first session for 2001 the Vanuatu Parliament was incapacitated because the Speaker, Paul Ren Tari, refused to allow debate on the motion. The Vanuatu Supreme Court upheld the validity of the motion, but Sope claimed that his coalition was the victim of foreign interference and a political conspiracy between the government and the state law offices that culminated in a 'libellous' motion of no confidence. Throughout, Sope and his allies maintained pressure on VP and UMP backbenchers in the hope of inducing defections by marginalized MPs for whom personal allegiance might be considered a tradable commodity. Despite consistent pressure, the government of Edward Natapei emerged victorious from the constitutional crisis and Vanuatu remained peaceful, although the events set in train a year of further political manoeuvring which culminated in the arrest and conviction of Sope on charges of forgery and the intervention of elements of the police and the VMF in national politics.

⁸ I would like to thank Daniel Oakman, Jenny Brown, Donald Denoon and Ron May for their comments on drafts of this paper.

Since 1988 political stability in Vanuatu has been challenged regularly, but the country has neither yielded to violent conflict nor suffered an effective *coup d'état*, despite the predictions of policy analysts and regional journalists. Nonetheless, since the beginning of 2001 government performance has been undermined by political flux and ongoing disquiet amongst the disciplined forces. Beginning with the constitutional crisis of March-April 2001, this paper addresses recent unrest in Vanuatu against the backdrop of domestic political manoeuvring, poor economic performance, pressure for reform and the spectre of a coup. It argues that despite the volatile nature of recent events in Vanuatu, which is seen increasingly as part of the arc of instability, the coalition government of Edward Natapei has successfully countered dissident internal forces.

The trigger

In the weeks before the first ordinary sitting of parliament for 2001 was scheduled to begin, a split emerged in the coalition government of Barak Sope. In early March the government's second largest faction, the UMP, defected to the opposition. UMP President Serge Vohor claimed that his party had been marginalized by Sope's administration: in particular, the UMP's policies on education were being ignored, and Sope had been unable to address the global drop in copra prices which severely affected the UMP's mainly rural constituents. Their concerns about the policies of the coalition leadership exacerbated the feeling that the UMP was not adequately represented in the Council of Ministers. When Vohor demanded a cabinet reshuffle to rectify this, Sope refused (*Trading Post* 28 March 2001). The situation was made more galling to the UMP executive because it had agreed not to run candidates against their coalition partners in the Santo by-election in February 2001. All member parties in the coalition government had agreed to back the National United Party (NUP) candidate, Leo Tamata, after the death of the incumbent NUP MP, Anas Tinwako. Having maintained coalition unity to assure representation for the NUP, but refused increased representation for his own party, Vohor canvassed his options.

In early March, without consulting the UMP (or the attorney general), Sope signed an agreement with the Italian company, Volani, to develop a cattle project on Santo for a reported vt424 million (\$US2.9 million). Santo is the heartland of the UMP. Vohor was backing the rival Mondragon Group's bid to develop the Big Bay area. It has been claimed that Mondragon donated

\$US150,000 to the UMP. Although the UMP lost two MPs during the defection, Sope's parliamentary majority evaporated.⁹

The motion

The parliament was scheduled to commence its first ordinary session on 26 March 2001, but it was delayed by a walkout by Vanua'aku Pati members, ostensibly in protest over the railroading of legislation to expedite voter registration for the upcoming Municipal Elections for Port Vila. On 26 March the UMP formally defected and the government was forced to withdraw all its bills. The defection set in train events that would incapacitate the first ordinary session for 2001 through boycotts, walkouts and court cases.

While no government bills were addressed during the sitting, four private members' bills were put before the house for consideration. Primary amongst these was the motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Sope, signed by the 27 VP and UMP MPs. Tari and his deputies were also targeted for motions of no confidence, although the standing orders make no provisions for censuring the speaker.

A motion of no confidence is usually a straightforward affair, simply stating that the majority of members has lost faith in the capacity of the prime minister. However, the motion in question included details of Sope's involvement in three major financial scandals during his parliamentary career – two of which would have extended Vanuatu's already sizeable external debt and emasculated the economy – and asserted an improper relationship between Sope's administration and Dinh Van Than, the naturalized Vietnamese businessman who is the president of the NUP. The speaker of the parliament, NUP MP for Maewo, Paul Ren Tari, refused to allow debate on the motion. Observers believed that the motion was a tactical blunder, allowing Sope to instigate defamation proceedings against its 27 signatories. However, the Supreme Court upheld its validity, stating that because none of the charges had been aired in public, the motion was protected by parliamentary privilege.

When it became clear that he had lost his parliamentary majority, Sope announced that the Council of Ministers would advise the president to dissolve parliament. Sope promised to resign if the president refused. Despite the expectation amongst the NUP executive – and the Council of Ministers – that President John Bani would vote according to the party's directives (Bani was a

⁹ Paul Telukluk (Malakula) joined the Grin Pati (Green Party). Irene Bongnaim (Ambrym) joined the Vanuatu Republican Party of former prime minister Maxime Carlot Korman.

founding member of the NUP), the president refused to dissolve parliament and instead followed the advice of the State Law Office. Sope refused to resign.

Immediately, the VP executive requested Chief Justice Vincent Lunapek to allow parliament to be reconvened to consider the motion of no confidence and elect a new government (*Trading Post* 4 April 2001). On Friday 6 April Lunapek ruled that the speaker had acted improperly and ordered him to recall parliament to consider the motion (Supreme Court of Vanuatu 2001). When parliament reconvened, the speaker delayed the tabling of the motion, pending corrections and amendments, despite the fact that his office and the Office of the Clerk had already approved the motion for passage through the house, before its introduction. Only when it was made clear to Tari that if he went to gaol on contempt charges he could no longer be a member of parliament did he apologize to the court and agree to recall the house. At 7 p.m. on 13 April, heavily guarded by police, Tari reconvened parliament and, following a government walkout, Edward Natapei, the president of the VP, was voted in as prime minister.

When parliament met again on 7 May, Tari suspended six members of the new government, including Prime Minister Natapei and Deputy Prime Minister Serge Vohor, for breaches of the standing orders and the constitution. The remaining twenty-one government MPs walked out in solidarity. The speaker claimed that by taking him to court in April the government MPs had breached standing orders and the constitution, but the Supreme Court again overturned his ruling. Once again he was directed to reconvene parliament, or face charges of contempt and a six-month gaol sentence. Undaunted, on Monday 14 May the speaker (who possessed the only key to the parliamentary chamber) failed to appear. Further, Tari made several public comments against the judiciary and the new government, and openly sided with Sope's regime. Despite being informed of their obligations by the State Law Office, Tari's deputies refused to help open the chamber. Access to the house was gained when a ladder was lowered from the Public Gallery.

That evening Natapei, on the advice of the attorney general, directed the police to arrest the speaker and his two deputies, Irene Bongnaim and Henry Yauko. They were apprehended early next morning – the speaker at the residence of Barak Sope. Despite strong criticisms from Sope and the opposition, parliament elected a new speaker, MP for Efate and former prime minister, Donald Kalpokas Masikevanua. The new government came to power with a majority of one (26-25) in the 52-seat parliament.

During the turmoil of 2001 Sope and his allies probed the VP and UMP backbenches for weaknesses. Rumours surfaced that Sope had won back power and that the VP, supposedly wracked by internal divisions, had disintegrated. Simultaneously, several backbenchers were targeted for bribes. Foster Rakom, a Francophone VP MP from Mele, claimed that he had been approached by one of Dinh Van Than's lieutenants who offered vt5 million, a ministerial portfolio, and the completion of a community church house if he would join Sope (*Trading Post* 30 March 2001). Rakom was not expected to be re-elected in 2002 and he stood to gain considerably by defecting. (Rakom's bid for re-election in the May 2002 elections was unsuccessful). To avoid confrontation in Port Vila, and ensure that no backbenchers were tempted, the VP relocated its headquarters to the relative safety of Donald Kalpokas's community, Lelepa. There were no defections.

Nevertheless the VP/UMP did not ignore pressures from their own marginalized members. In mid April it appeared that Kora Maki, the UMP member for Epi, might defect and support a motion of no confidence. Maki received significant funding for his 1998 election campaign from Willie Jimmy (NUP). (Jimmy was a faction leader in the UMP until his defection to the NUP in February 2001). The same week, Sope claimed that Luganville MP George Wells (VP) had requested vt8 million (\$US 54,000) backing for his 2002 re-election campaign to defect to the MPP. Wells publicly denied the allegation, but later that day it was revealed that the VP executive had decided not to pre-select Wells as VP candidate for Luganville for the March 2002 elections. (The party subsequently rescinded this decision). When Kalpokas was installed as speaker, Kora Maki became his deputy speaker and George Wells the second deputy speaker.

What motivated Tari in April and May 2001 remains obscure. His understanding of the laws and regulations of the parliament and of the principle of the separation of powers under Vanuatu's Westminster-style government was queried throughout the crisis. In his April judgement, Chief Justice Lunapek noted that the 'interpretation of the constitution ... is self-evidently ... entrusted to the Court by the people of this country through the Constitution' (Supreme Court 2001). Tari's lawyer, John Malcolm, conceded during the April court case that the speaker had erred when he dismissed the motion of no confidence. Yet for two months after the case Tari stated that the courts had no right to bully him because parliamentary privilege protected him. A week after the trial Tari's counsel terminated his relationship with his client, stating, 'our client has refused to listen to our advice' (*Trading Post* 14 April 2001). When the Supreme Court finally heard the sedition charges against the three speakers in December 2001, Justice Coventry dismissed the case, ruling that at the time of

their arrest they were covered by Article 27 of the constitution because parliament was still in session, but he cautioned them against abusing their privileges.¹⁰ In his judgement, Coventry noted that parliamentary privilege 'does not mean that a person can do what they like...without people having recourse to the court' (*Trading Post* 1 December 2001).

Financial crisis

The VP predicated the ouster of Sope on the latter's involvement in clandestine financial schemes, in particular the agreement with Amerendra Nath Ghosh. Ghosh had arrived in Port Vila in February 2000 with what was described as 'possibly the world's largest ruby', which he intended to 'donate' to the people of Vanuatu. He promised to initiate a project to seal the road around Efate, build a walled complex for the Council of Ministers, and negotiate with foreign consortia to build a new international airport (*Nasara* 14 April 2001). Ghosh reputedly was awarded an honorary consulship for Laos and the ambassadorship in Thailand (*Radio Vanuatu* 19 April 2001). He also claimed to have been given petroleum and mineral exploration and fishing rights, royalty free. In return for the ruby, it was reported that Ghosh was to receive \$US300 million in bearer bonds from the Reserve Bank. This was equal to 140 per cent of Vanuatu's gross domestic product, and had Sope issued the bonds, Vanuatu's external debt would have quadrupled (*Australian Financial Review* 26 February 2001).

Sope claimed that revenue generated by the government's joint ventures with Ghosh would be used to settle outstanding debts with the police and VMF and fully compensate people for losses incurred during the Santo Rebellion in 1980. In October 2000 he made the first payment to the police, reputedly from these earnings. At the time, the acting police commissioner, Arthur Caulton, averred that this marked a turning point in relations between the police and the government, but great uncertainty remained (*Trading Post* 8 September 2001). Natapei now claims that the payment was made from savings in the recurrent police budget of 1999, accrued under the Kalpokas administration (March 1998–November 1999). Both the police and VMF maintain that the government's debt to them is yet to be fully acquitted.

The Ghosh affair refocused attention on Sope's involvement in a succession of potentially disastrous financial deals. Sope was centrally involved in the 1996 Swanson deal, when as Finance minister he had approved the issue of promissory notes for tens of millions of dollars to an Australian businessman,

¹⁰ It states: 'No member of Parliament may be arrested, detained, prosecuted or proceeded against in respect of opinions given or votes cast by him in Parliament in the exercise of his office' (*Constitution*, Art.27, Sect.1).

Peter Swanson. Swanson had guaranteed a 250 per cent profit on their issue. On advice from Scotland Yard, Prime Minister Korman annulled the deal and had Swanson arrested (Swanson was released after three months by presidential pardon). Also in 1996 he had forced the Vanuatu National Provident Fund to transfer vt27 million (\$US180,000) to the Brisbane-based Cybank Internet banking company, none of which was recovered.

In March 2001 a report to the US Permanent Committee on Investigations had named Vanuatu as an international money-laundering centre. While international focus was on the regulation of Vanuatu's economy, Natapei mounted an attack on Sope's personal record as an economic manager. During his tenure as minister of Finance between 1996 and 1997, Sope had failed to provide a development budget or an annual budget. While Sope claimed to have reduced his country's debt by vt2.5 billion (\$US170 million), much of the debt reduction actually came about because of the agreement by the Chinese government to write-off several loans – including that which had paid for the parliament house – and grant a new vt380 million (\$US2.7 million) soft loan. Natapei claimed that when Sope's coalition took office in 1999 there was approximately vt200 million (\$US1.4 million) in reserve. The Natapei government is currently working with a monthly overdraft of vt400 million (\$US2.8 million). VP Finance Minister Joe Carlo revealed that the government would be looking for other alternatives to maintain the cash flow until the end of 2001. The former government had taken steps to reform the Vanuatu taxation system with the intention of improving the government's revenue base, particularly by the approval of a gambling bill, which was calculated to yield over vt240 million (\$US1.6 million) per month; to date no revenue has eventuated (*Radio Vanuatu* 21 May 2001).

Sope's maverick management style was only partially to blame for Vanuatu's precarious economic situation. The cash-flow problems that Natapei highlighted resulted primarily from declining revenue and lack of economic stimulus, although Sope's overspending undeniably reduced confidence. Lack of government coordination with private enterprises, entrenched political instability, declining customs and taxation revenues, and poor global prices for Vanuatu's cash crops, have all contributed to the weakening of the economy. Donors have highlighted Vanuatu's narrow revenue base – which relies heavily on tourism, agriculture and financial services – as an area for immediate reform. The emphasis in the ADB's most recent economic review, undertaken in 2001, was to, 'quickly commercialise agriculture and fisheries ... promote foreign investment in plantation forestry in order to boost economic growth' and consider the possibility of exploring options for mining (ADB 2001: 3).

Statistics for the first half of 2002 confirmed a decline in agricultural production and exports as well as a decline in tourist arrivals, compounding the negative economic growth in 2001 (DFAT 2002). The challenge to investor confidence which Sope's leadership style entailed obscured how deeply rooted Vanuatu's economic woes were, but the vigour of national political manoeuvring distracted from long-term policy considerations.

Sope's political rhetoric was loaded with references to the damage that the Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP) (the structural adjustment programme sponsored by the Asian Development Bank), was doing to Vanuatu. At its inception in 1997, Sope had stated that the CRP would cause suffering to the people of Vanuatu (*Trading Post* 17 September 1997), although in office he was forced to grant the project tacit support. By May 2001 Sope had distilled his sentiments further. The CRP, he stated, 'only serves the interests of Australia and New Zealand. Over 70 foreign advisers are here under the CRP and they are all paid by the Vanuatu government under the ADB loan ... it is ridiculous' (*Trading Post* 19 May 2001). Apprehension that Vanuatu's sovereignty might have been jeopardized by the CRP has been fuelled by sketchy reports of the negative impact of the structural adjustment programme in Papua New Guinea, and has been an enduring theme in political rhetoric in Vanuatu since 1997. Although Natapei has vowed to adhere to the CRP in view of the poor financial position of the country, comments from senior members of his administration about the dominant role of foreign advisers in the programme have become more pronounced. Minister for Foreign Affairs Jean Alain Mahe (UMP) noted that Vanuatu's financial difficulties are compounded by the 'policy of austerity translated by the implementation of the CRP mainly advised by Australian consultants' (*Trading Post* 25 August 2001).

Despite his reaffirmation of support for the CRP, Natapei has proposed a much shorter list of achievable reforms and has posited a much greater emphasis on grassroots people. There is a growing criticism of the effects of Westminster democracy in Vanuatu, which may affect the CRP's implementation, despite transparent domestic support for reform. The call for more home grown strategies and systems to be adopted has been fuelled by the perceived failures of the democratic state. For example, the director of the Pacific Resources Concerns Centre in Suva, Hilda Lini (a former national parliamentarian), has called on Melanesian women to renounce the 'western response to the Melanesian state of conflict' and design a new philosophy to guide the people of Vanuatu. Democracy, she stated, 'will continue to corrupt Melanesia resulting in the continuous uncontrolled crime, violence and poverty' (*Port Vila Presse* 20 October 2001). Fuelling these sentiments, Sope attempted to position himself as

the 'authentic' voice of grassroots Vanuatu, but Natapei guaranteed that his administration's reformist policies (which are consistent with the CRP) would not compromise Vanuatu's autonomy and would ensure that bogus deals such as the one Sope had entered into with Ghosh will not jeopardize Vanuatu's weak economy in the future.

The spectre of a coup

While events in Vanuatu's fractious political history (starting with the Santo rebellion in 1980) have often generated muted bemusement in the region, Vanuatu is haunted by the spectres of a coup and/or ethnic disintegration.¹¹ The tragic outbreak of ethnic violence which occasioned the collapse of the state in the Solomon Islands in 1998-2000, continuing social unrest in Papua New Guinea, and the ethnically-motivated coups in Fiji in 1987 and 2000 have inspired observers to place Vanuatu on a shared trajectory of social disintegration with its Melanesian neighbours (see Reilly 2000; Maher 2000).

The *Trading Post* reported that on 13 April 2001 – the night that the motion of no confidence was finally debated – Sope and Internal Affairs Minister Barnabus Tabi (NUP, Pentecost) had approached the acting police commissioner, Arthur Caulton, requesting him to enact emergency powers in the light of the political turmoil and constitutional crisis, and to declare martial law until further notice (*Trading Post* 18 April 2001). Acting Commissioner Caulton refused the request because the political situation did not warrant a state of emergency and no critical law and order problem was apparent. Sope's attempt to use the police to entrench his position raised fears that a coup was imminent. Despite strong links between Sope's Melanesian Progressive Party deputy, Sato Kilman¹² and the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF), the VMF and police remained neutral. In part, this might be traced to the circumstances surrounding the abduction of President Jean Marie Leye Lenelcau by VMF officers in 1996. After striking for several weeks without success, VMF officers had flown the president to Malekula to meet Sope, who was then the Finance minister. The VMF was at the time claiming \$US980,000 in outstanding allowances. Sope promised both an amnesty for the leaders of the 'industrial coup' and the payment of outstanding allowances, but his failure to fully

¹¹ Barak Sope first attempted to seize power in 1988 when he was sworn in as interim prime minister by then President Ati George Sokomanu (Sope's uncle) after Sokomanu had dissolved parliament. Sokomanu, Sope and their co-conspirators were arrested on charges of mutiny and seditious conspiracy, although the charges were overturned on the grounds of mistrial and insufficient evidence. A similar unsuccessful attempt at political *coup d'état* was mounted in 1995 by Fr Walter Lini and Serge Vohor (see Ambrose 1996).

¹² Kilman is a former commanding officer of the VMF. In the aftermath of the constitutional crisis in May, Kilman (MP for Malekula) broke away to form the People's Progressive Party.

account for his earlier promises has undermined any residual allegiances he might have had with VMF officers.¹³

Throughout the constitutional crisis, Sope attempted to position himself as the authentic voice of grassroots niVanuatu. He claimed that he had been ousted by a political conspiracy implicating foreign diplomatic missions and senior VP/UMP coalition ministers. His deputy, Willy Jimmy, drew attention to the fact that the public prosecutor, who had issued the warrant for the arrest of the speaker and his deputies, is married to Natapei's minister of Health, Clement Leo (*Trading Post* 19 May 2001). When Sope's supporters suggested forcibly reinstating the speaker and his deputies, Sope had counselled them to remain calm, though he implored them to 'take to the streets' to force out interfering foreigners should the need arise (*Trading Post* 21 April 2001). In late April 2001 Sope claimed that the Australian High Commission was directly interfering in Vanuatu's domestic politics because Australian Federal Police (AFP) had tapped the phones of government MPs. In fact, the AFP were investigating a consignment of heroin supposedly missing in Vanuatu, following a seizure in Fiji, with the cooperation of the Vanuatu Police. Commissioner Bong stated that their presence had been kept secret to avoid any tip-offs, and was in no way related to the political turmoil.

In September 2001 Natapei stated his intention to investigate allegations against Sope of contempt of court and misappropriation of public funds (*Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire* 1 September 2001), but when police tried to carry out a search warrant against Sope they were deterred by Sope's Ifiran supporters who were armed with knives and axes. While Sope eventually accepted a court summons on charges arising from the issue of bank guarantees, it appeared likely that he would mobilize grass-roots support in the event of his political career being undermined by criminal prosecution.

Sope has thrived in the arena of national politics, and broadened his support base from his home island of Ifira, in Port Vila harbour, to the entire Rural Efate electorate. Sope is acknowledged as an astute leader whose leadership skills saw him elected prime minister although his party held only four seats in the 52-seat parliament. Yet support in Ifira has waned since the late 1990s, specifically because the negative impacts of his involvement in scandals such as the Ghosh deal had been consistently and convincingly highlighted by the Natapei administration. In July 2002 the Supreme Court of Vanuatu sentenced Sope to

three years in jail on two convictions for forging bogus bank guarantees worth \$US23 million – a \$US5 million bank guarantee for the Vanuatu Investment Corporation Limited and a \$US18 million guarantee for Dynamic Growth Projects Pty Ltd (*Port Vila Presse* 19 July 2002). Although Sope's supporters attempted to mount demonstrations for his release in August 2002, they could rouse little public support because the chief of Ifira, Mantoï Kalsakau III, argued against the demonstrations. The island of Ifira – Sope's core constituency – has shifted its allegiance behind UMP MP for Efate Rural, Stephen Kalsakau. Despite initial fears that it would foment civil dissent and make him a martyr, Sope's imprisonment has been met with indifference.

While the government had its attention focussed on defeating Sope, the appointment of Mael Apisai as Commissioner of Police provoked the most serious challenge to the government's legitimacy since it had taken office. On 4 August 2002 police officers acting under direction from a troika of senior officers – Eric Pakoa, superintendent of police for the Southern Islands, the head of the VMF, Lieutenant Colonel Api Jack Marikembo, and the acting commissioner of police, Holi Simon – arrested the fifteen members of the Police Services Commission (PSC) on charges of 'seditious conspiracy' arising from procedural irregularities in Apisai's appointment. Following Apisai's appointment, senior staff, including Marikembo (an unsuccessful applicant for the position of commissioner of police) refused to carry out orders issued by Apisai. Arguably, Apisai was appointed to purge anti-government elements from within the police and VMF, but his subordinates forcibly pre-empted their censure. At the time of his arrest, the new commissioner had prepared, but not issued, disciplinary procedures against Marikembo and other insubordinate officers.

In the early hours of 4 August 2002, a group of Vanuatu Mobile Force troops, using the operational title 'Operation Procedure 2002', arrested Apisai and the entire PSC, including the attorney general, the secretary to the president, and the ombudsman. Despite the support of the majority of the VMF, members of the police force had met Apisai's appointment with great scepticism because the PSC had not scrutinized his application. Vanuatu's disciplined forces had been without an official commander since the retirement of Commissioner Peter Bong in 2001. Jenny Ligo, commission member and president of the Vanuatu Council of Women, stated that the chair of the PSC, Michael Taun, had bowed to political influence from within the government, but not from Minister of Internal Affairs Joe Natuman, which sparked fears of an internal struggle within the VP. (Deputy Prime Minister Serge Vohor (UMP, Santo) later took charge of the

¹³ Key officers have been paid settlements, but the periodic refusal of ministers to approve payments, the lack of funds to acquit such payments, the lack of records of what is owed, and claims by officers who are not entitled to allowances, have all delayed the settlement of the issue.

police/VMF portfolio from Natuman under direction from Prime Minister Natapei, who was attending the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Fiji).

On 8 August Justice Roger Coventry overturned Apisai's appointment and directed the PSC to settle on an acting commissioner as soon as possible in preparation for the appointment of a commissioner once the PSC had considered a fresh round of applicants. Coventry's decision was arguably oriented towards diffusing tension between the government and the troika of dissident officers. The PSC's guidelines for selecting the police commissioner are vague, the apparent political interference in the selection process notwithstanding. Coventry's ruling allayed government fears of further action during the Melanesian Arts Festival and Fes Napuan (18-28 August), but when the government launched a procedural counter-strike fears of civil strife were again raised. The arrest of Holi Simon and Api Jack Marikembo on 26 August 2002 was carried out after the public prosecutor laid charges of mutiny and incitement to mutiny against nineteen senior VMF and police officers arising from the initial arrest of the PSC.

The arrests inspired reports that Natapei had gone into hiding, while heated exchanges erupted between 'rival groups of police' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 27 August 2002). The factionalism between the police and the VMF which emerged during acute political instability in 1996 stirred anxiety amongst donor countries that party rivalry might escalate to organized violence between factions of the disciplined forces. Increased donor support for law and order and policing projects, including the establishment of the Joint Police Operations Command (JPOC), was informed by the need to break this perceived organizational rivalry. Although the success of these initiatives remains to be proven, until 2002 there had been no serious breakdown in relations between the police and the VMF.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* story elicited an angry response from government spokesman Daniel Bangtor, who decried the media's inaccurate reporting and moved the government to lodge a complaint with the Australian High Commission: at the time of the arrests Natapei was chairing a meeting of the prime minister's Special Advisory Group in the heart of Port Vila (*Port Vila Presse* 31 August 2002). The officers were released on bail on 9 September 2002: junior police officers will carry out the investigation into 'Operation Procedure 2002'. The police and VMF officers who were suspended by the PSC have attached two caveats to any reconciliation process: they have demanded that their case against the PSC be reopened and that their suspension be dropped (*Trading Post* 31 August 2002). Without their imprimatur the proposed

reconciliation ceremony will be meaningless; if the government concedes to their demands it would create a dangerous precedent, especially in the light of recent statements by Prime Minister Natapei that law and order would be enforced fairly and uniformly (*Trading Post* 31 August 2002). The president has disbanded the PSC under Michael Taun and replaced it with one under the chair of the director general of the Office of the Prime Minister, Jean Sese.

Conclusion

Scepticism over the long-term prospects for peace in Vanuatu is based on three interrelated issues: economic stagnation, regional trends, and fractious national politics. For over a decade, Vanuatu's parliament has been effectively neutered by factional infighting and constitutional crises. The fragmentation of the VP in 1991 undermined the only party capable of forming government in its own right. Since then, provision of services to the islands has become negligible as the remnant parties engage in 'horse-trading' to form coalitions. This situation has shifted attention from long-term policy considerations to the immediate pragmatic concerns of brokering alliances. Whereas these forces have contributed to the breakdown of social and political order elsewhere in the Pacific – notably in the Solomon Islands (Kabutaulaka 2001: 1-3) – Vanuatu has remained peaceful, at least in part because of grass-roots indifference to such political spectacles.

Throughout the 1990s the focus of politicians has shifted to internal forces as the major challenges to stability. The endemic problem of regime instability in Vanuatu has undermined durable policy formation and implementation, especially with relation to macro-economic policy, with visible impact on the viability of Vanuatu's economy. Recent events have shifted the focus from ethnic unrest as a possible source of instability to the role of the disciplined forces. The acquittal of monies owed to the police and VMF has been an enduring problem for the Vanuatu government, and has created subsidiary problems in its wake.

The continued survival of the VP/UMP government has brought respite from the political instability of the 1990s, but key obstacles remain. Its prospects were significantly strengthened by the conviction of Barak Sope. Despite Sope's preparedness to invoke a narrow vision of Vanuatu's national interest in 2001, his eventual arrest and conviction did not translate into civil unrest. By his actions in this, Natapei signalled his intention to stamp out the sort of maverick leadership which Sope embodied, and hopefully lessen the potential for the economic mismanagement and corruption which Vanuatu has witnessed over

the past decade. Whether he will pursue his convictions within his own government is yet to be seen, but considering the precarious majority his government holds it is perhaps unlikely. While UMP spokespeople have reiterated their allegiance to the Vanua'aku Pati and publicly supported its policy imperatives, key government members, including the deputy prime minister, have been targeted for investigation (*Trading Post* 19 May 2001).

The relative calm of Natapei's term in office has been shadowed by the recurrent fear that each political event will trigger greater conflict. Over the past decade Vanuatu has managed to resolve its crises peacefully. However, events in Solomon Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea have encouraged the view of social breakdown in Vanuatu as inevitable. Senior government officials have consistently distanced Vanuatu from the social and political disintegration in neighbouring Melanesian countries and criticized regional media for their exaggerated and inaccurate reporting. Arthur Caulton reiterated these points when he accepted the mantle of acting police commissioner: 'Alphabetically, Vanuatu comes last, at the bottom of the group but this is not a disadvantage since we have taken our time over the last 22 years to learn from the mistakes of our neighbour countries' (*Trading Post* 31 August 2002). The Natapei administration has demonstrated its willingness to take on difficult targets and possibly risk unrest to fulfil its core political aims. Whether Caulton's statements were pure rhetoric, intended to support these aims, or provide grounds for believing that Vanuatu will not become part of the so-called 'arc of instability', remains to be seen.

Epilogue

In national elections in May 2002, the Vanua'aku Pati was initially returned with 14 seats, but attracted 3 independent candidates, giving it numerical superiority in the House over its coalition partner the UMP, which won 15 seats. The governing coalition thus has a majority of 32 of the 52 seats, and the VP retained the prime ministership.

Paul Ren Tari was not re-elected to the seat of Maewo in the May 2002 elections: he was defeated by Philip Boedoro (VP). He is currently seeking compensation for the charges brought against him by the Natapei government.

IN SPITE OF MR SPEIGHT?

FIJI'S ROAD TO THE GENERAL ELECTIONS OF 2001¹⁴

Brij V. Lal

George Speight's seizure of the Fiji parliament on 19 May 2000 now seems like a bad, nightmarish dream. Contrary to all provocations and incentives to violence, Fiji managed, but only just, to retrieve itself from the precipice of national disintegration. A year later, Speight was tried for treason, and is currently serving a seven-year sentence, though moves are afoot to have him pardoned. In August 2001 the country went to the polls, returning Laisenia Qarase's newly-formed Soqosoqo Duavata ni Levenivanua to government with thirty-two seats. The Labour Party, his main rival, won twenty-seven. The holding of the election was an important development, but instead of resolving the country's many deep-seated problems it compounded them. Qarase breached the constitution under which he was elected by refusing to have Chaudhry in a multi-party cabinet. The constitution provides that any political party with more than 10 per cent of seats in parliament is constitutionally entitled to be invited into cabinet. Under a formula provided for in the Korolevu Declaration, Qarase would have twelve cabinet positions and Chaudhry eight. Labour challenged the government's decision. The Fiji Court of Appeal ruled in Labour's favour, but the matter will be settled finally by the Supreme Court in early 2003. Meanwhile, Fiji remains marooned in the shallows. Whether the people of Fiji will accept the verdict of the court, whatever it might be, remains to be seen.

The early days following the hijacking of the Fijian parliament were a time of great confusion and apprehension for the people of Fiji. After fifty-seven days,

¹⁴ For background to the coup see Lal (2000a, 2000b). This paper draws from my personal archives on political developments in Fiji, which can be consulted at the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific at the Australian National University.