

# State Society and Governance in Melanesia

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Briefing Note



## Vanuatu's 2008 Election - Difficulties of Government Formation in a Fractionalized Setting

Three months after the 2nd September 2008 election, Vanuatu was still without a stable government. In the wake of the September polls, there was intense manoeuvring by the major parties involving accusations of 'member stealing' and allegations of the exchange of large sums of money to secure support. A government led by Edward Natapei was formed on September 22 based upon a coalition between the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) and the National United Party (NUP). With a slim 27 to 25 majority in the country's 52 seat Parliament, the new government immediately faced a succession of 'no confidence' challenges, each moved by frustrated opposition MPs who had missed out on positions in cabinet.

Vohor, leader of the opposition Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), switched allegiance and joined the VP/NUP alliance, backing Natapei as Prime Minister. That accommodation, however, contained the seeds of its own undoing. To accommodate Vohor



**Maxime Carlot Korman - Leader of the Opposition (VRP)**



**Ham Lini on the left (NUP - Deputy PM) and Edward Natapei on the right (VP - Prime Minister)**

The first challenge came within days, and was tabled by leader of the Vanuatu Republican Party (VRP) and former Minister of Lands, Maxime Carlot Korman. This was defeated on October 3 after Serge

and the UMP with offers of ministerial portfolios, the government dropped some members of the VP and NUP from cabinet. Four rebelled, and joined with the opposition to table another 'no-confidence' motion. By 26th of November, when the consequent vote was held, three had returned to the governing coalition. Together with several independents, they enabled Natapei's government to survive its second challenge. Two days later, a third 'no confidence' motion was tabled. When the Speaker ruled this out of order, the opposition challenged the decision in court. The motion was eventually allowed to go forward, but was withdrawn due to a loss of support before the vote was scheduled.

The fragility of the government that emerged from the 2008 election confirms several key trends in Vanuatu politics. Party loyalties, particularly since the commencement of coalition politics in 1991, have become extraordinarily fickle, with MPs being willing to regularly switch allegiances in search of personal advantage. Connected to this, governing coalitions tend to be exceptionally fragile and brittle, and regular ‘no confidence’ challenges have diminished the ability of successive government to focus on lawmaking. Patronage and money politics have become increasingly central to the political process, as vividly indicated by one inadvertent revelation live on Vanuatu national radio during the post-2008 election period. Not realising that his microphone as switched on, one newly elected VP MP (Harry Iauko) was heard lambasting his VP colleague (Philip Boedoro) for not supporting the motion, despite all the money he had been paid to oppose the government.

### Trends in Electoral Politics

Since the heyday of party politics in the decade after independence, Vanuatu has seen the emergence of an increasingly fractionalized party system and growing numbers of independent MPs contesting elections (see Van Trease 2005). During the 1980s, Vanuatu politics was dominated by two major parties - the VP and UMP. Walter Lini’s VP, with backing from Anglophone and Protestant politicians, emerged as the initial post-independence government, while the mainly Francophone UMP - which was uneasy about Anglophone dominance in an independent Vanuatu - formed the opposition. Following a split within the VP leadership in 1991, and the formation of the breakaway National United Party (NUP), Vanuatu’s era of coalition governments began. The 1991 election generated the country’s first coalition cabinet, entailing an alliance between the UMP and NUP. In the years that followed, the VP and UMP continued to fragment, due in large part to increasing competition within their leadership groups. An increasing number of new parties contested elections and won seats, making it ever more difficult to form robust governing coalitions and to maintain these in office. The number of parties reached an all time high in the 2008 election

with 28 contesting in varying numbers in Vanuatu’s 17 electoral constituencies. Vanuatu’s shift away from a two party system has mirrored the decline of ‘independence’ as the most important political issue. Today, language, island, community, family, loyalty to individual political big men or even church denomination are the key factors which influence voter choice.

In addition to the problems within their leadership groups, parties have also had to deal with declining grass roots discipline. Party sub-committees often refuse to accept executive decisions regarding candidate selection resulting in splits, breakaway parties and rising numbers of independents contesting. 89 independents contested in 2008 - the highest number ever (Table 1). They received over 19% of the total vote. The overall number of candidates contesting has also soared, reaching 345 in 2008, a 46% increase on the number that contested at the previous election in 2004. The average share of the vote obtained by victors, 76% in 1979, fell to an all-time low of 38% in 2008. The increasingly competitive character of elections has contributed to the difficulty the major parties face in winning seats while the ever more fractured political landscape makes all the more difficult the establishment of durable coalition governments.

**Table 1: Participation and Rates of Success in Vanuatu Election**

| Year | No. of Parties | No. of Independents (successful) | No. of Candidates | No. of Elected Members | % of Total Vote Received by Successful Candidates |
|------|----------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1979 | 14             | 12 (1)                           | 69                | 39                     | 76%                                               |
| 1983 | 6              | 14                               | 91                | 39                     | 72%                                               |
| 1987 | 8              | 9                                | 108               | 46                     | 72%                                               |
| 1991 | 9              | 4                                | 137               | 46                     | 56%                                               |
| 1995 | 10             | 19 (2)                           | 159               | 50                     | 57%                                               |
| 1998 | 12             | 63 (2)                           | 212               | 52                     | 47%                                               |
| 2002 | 14             | 68 (5)                           | 255               | 52                     | 42%                                               |
| 2004 | 16             | 72 (8)                           | 236               | 52                     | 43%                                               |
| 2008 | 28             | 89 (4)                           | 345               | 52                     | 38%                                               |

Since the early 1990s, leading politicians have had to negotiate multiple deals with a bewildering collection of small parties and independents in order to form a government. Trying to balance the demands

has become more and more difficult. Coalitions can easily fall apart as ambitious opposition leaders use money and personal favours to break governing alliances. It is now necessary to bring together at least three major parties to form a viable governing coalition. If this cannot be achieved, instability reigns. For example, between 1995 and 2002, a total of nine different coalition governments were formed. Regular votes of no-confidence, and even more regular threats of such votes, occurred, and there were two snap elections, each of which brought down the elected governments after only two years in office.

### Campaign Issues

Vanuatu's current political culture of instability associated with the maintenance of coalition governments is complicated by increasing accusations of corruption levelled against leading politicians. The local newspapers regularly run stories of suspected bribery and nepotism. Politicians are commonly viewed as using their access to power as a money-making opportunity, one that provides chances to reward family and friends rather than look after the best interests of the country. Despite reports from the Ombudsman detailing abuses by the country's leaders, cases seldom reach the courts - due to the fact that the allegedly guilty individuals are often politically influential members of the governing coalition or holders of ministerial portfolios. The 2005-8 government of Ham Lini survived for close to four years, many believe, because the Prime Minister refused to take any action against accused ministers. To have done so would have jeopardised the government's majority. The Prime Minister regularly made reference to the maintenance of political stability as his prime objective.

With increasing public dissatisfaction, some of the loudest voices during the 2008 campaign urged voters to elect a new, younger group of politicians to transform Vanuatu politics. Most party manifestos and individual politicians' campaign literature focussed on social issues - especially the burden of high school fees and the slow pace of economic development which has left many Ni-Vanuatu families struggling to survive. Land issues, the role of chiefs and custom in the country's political institutions and the need to clean up corruption and inefficiency in government were also prominent campaign issues. Reflecting the importance of church and religion in the lives of

most Ni-Vanuatu, several new parties and individual candidates emphasised Christian and family values. Harkening back to the at times bitter legacy of the 1906-1980 Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides and the difficult transition to independence, one party leader, Moanna Carcassas of the Green Confederation called for a new alliance of the Francophones (those whose first language is French).

### Election results

Voter turnout was 70.4%, reasonably high for a country that does not have compulsory voting. As in past elections, accusations of bribery were frequent. Electoral rolls were also in a poor state, with names often omitted or mis-recorded and deceased voters still appearing. People were often registered in several different places, creating the possibility of multiple voting. Despite these familiar difficulties, polling was conducted reasonably smoothly.

Counting was also reasonably trouble-free, with unofficial results for most constituencies available within several days. Early results in the Port Vila constituency, showing almost certain victory for independent candidate, Ralph Regenvanu, seemed to indicate that the voters had indeed had *inaf* ('enough' in Bislama, the local pidgin), endorsing the theme pressed on Regenvanu's campaign T-shirts. He went



**Ralph Regenvanu - New Independent MP for Port Vila**

on to win with the largest number of votes ever received by any candidate in the electoral history of Vanuatu. Yet the 2008 polls were not a dramatic break from past elections. The wholesale ousting of the old guard, which some had expected, did not materialize. Thirty sitting Members of Parliament

(58%) were returned - the highest number ever put back into office in any post-independence election. Of the 30 returned, 19 had been elected in 2002 and re-elected in 2004 - indicating the continued survival of that core group of veteran politicians who have come to dominate politics in Vanuatu.

Two long-serving members of parliament were, however, defeated: the leader of the Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP) Barak Sope, representing Efate; and Willie Jimmy (NUP) representing Port Vila. Sope's defeat was due most likely to changes in the Port Vila electoral boundary just prior to the election. People shifted from Efate into the Port Vila urban constituency included a large squatter population from which Barak Sope had previously received considerable support. Sope lodged an electoral challenge against three of the four victors in the Efate electorate, alleging extensive bribery and treating. The cases are still to be dealt with by the court. Willie Jimmy's loss was due most likely to the fact that he had alienated the leaders of NUP when he made moves to challenge Ham Lini for the position of President of the party. As a result, the party fielded a second NUP candidate in Port Vila, Patrick Crowby, and openly campaigned to ensure his victory.

Overall, the various parties experienced only slight changes in their results compared to the 2004 election, but enough in several cases to have an impact during the process of coalition formation. An increase for the VP from 8 to 11 and a decrease for the NUP from 10 to 8 meant - as agreed before the election in a memorandum of understanding between the two parties - that the VP leader, Edward Natapei, would take over as Prime Minister from Ham Lini, if the two parties were able to form a coalition. Conversely, Lini would become Deputy Prime Minister, the position Natapei held in the previous government. The VRP's increase from 4 to 7 seats encouraged party leader, Maxime Carlot Korman, to attempt to form his own coalition, rather than continuing his earlier alliance with NUP and VP. Long standing rivalries between Korman and the leader of the UMP, Serge Vohor, plus the fact that the UMP lost strength (down from 8 to 7 seats) were factors which discouraged Vohor from forming his own coalition. Just prior to the first vote of no-confidence, Vohor threw his support behind the VP and NUP.

The small parties either retained their numbers - e.g. the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) at 4, the



**Serge Vohor: UMP member for Santo**

Peoples Action Party (PAP) and Namangi Aute at 1 each - or lost support. The continued strength of the PPP may be due to the popularity of its leader, Sato Kilman from the island of Malakula, who has held ministerial portfolios in several previous governments. PAP and Namangi Aute are both island based parties - PAP on West Ambae and Namangi Aute on Malakula. The Green Confederation dropped from 3 to 2 and the MPP, the party led by Barak Sope, declined from 3 seats to 1 seat. Once the three largest parties - VP, NUP and UMP with a total number of 26 out of 52 seats between them - agreed to go into coalition, the potential significance of the smaller parties declined. In addition to VP, NUP and UMP, the governing coalition included four other parties: National Community Alliance (2 seats) and Nagriamel, Peoples Action Party and Fren Melanesian Party with 1 seat each. Although stability appeared to have finally been achieved, rumours of potential further shifts of allegiance continued to circulate.

The small number of women in Vanuatu's parliament is another continuing trend. Only two were elected from among the 17 who contested. The two sitting female MPs ran again - Isabelle Donald and Leinavao Tasso. Both are from the island of Epi and both are members of the VP. The two women took turns holding ministerial portfolios in the previous government. However, only Isabelle Donald was re-elected, along with a new female member for the island of Malakula, Rory Eta, who ran for the Vanuatu Family First Party. Not content with the result, Leinavao Tasso lodged a complaint against Isabelle Donald, accusing her of 'treating' via provision of food to voters during the periods just prior to and after the election. The court ruled against Donald, resulting in a by-election in

which VP and NUP agreed to jointly support her re-election as a VP candidate. Despite a large vote in her favour, she lost to independent candidate, Yoane Simon, the son of a former prominent Epi politician. The current parliament, therefore, is now reduced to only one female member.

While the outcome of the 2008 election suggests considerable continuity, there are also signs of significant generational change. Although incumbent turnover was low compared to previous elections, the defeat of Barak Sope and Willie Jimmy demonstrated that the old guard is not invincible. While Regenvanu's success in Port Vila appeared to signal the possible emergence of a new reform-oriented younger generation, political newcomers in Vanuatu find themselves quickly obliged to engage in the same kind of wheeling and dealing as their predecessors. What is less certain is whether the long period of rampant party splintering in Vanuatu since the early 1990s is likely to be a perpetual feature of the country's politics, or whether this will prove a temporary phase generated by the redundancy of the colonial bipolar Francophone/ Anglophone and some delay before the emergence of new lines of political polarization.

*This briefing note was prepared by Howard Van Trease.*

Photographs courtesy of the *Vanuatu Daily Post*.

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