

Governance in Vanuatu

Elise Huffer and Grace Molisa

Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva

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Governance in the South Pacific

The issue of governance in the South Pacific has arisen, as in other developing regions, from the concern of influential aid donors with promoting growth and a more efficient use of their decreasing development assistance. It has become apparent that past financial assistance has not been leading to self-sustaining growth and that South Pacific governments and bureaucracies have been showing increasing signs of instability, mismanagement, and even abuse of funds and of public trust. In addition, aid donors are uncomfortable with the increasing rise in the ideology of traditionalism and the demands put forth by certain groups and countries on the basis of special rights for indigenous peoples. As a result the donors promoting governance, particularly the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain, are seeking to advance the adoption of the principles that underlie liberal democracy, especially respect for the rule of law and for individual human rights.

One of the strategies of donors is to provide opportunities, through funding and technical support, to a variety of non-governmental actors to carry out activities such as, for instance, furthering non-formal

education about democratic values through training sessions and workshops carried out in both urban and rural areas, or improving the capacity of the media and highlighting its role in democratic politics. The strengthening of these non-government organisations is also aimed at enabling the latter to wield greater influence at the national and regional levels and to influence decision-making. It is in fact helping them become a collaborator of the state in providing services to people which the government has difficulty reaching as well as a check on state power, when the latter takes actions which are considered inauspicious or detrimental to basic liberal democratic rights. However, the promotion of international or non-local non-government organisations may weaken their local counterparts by creating rivalries and divisions within the non-government organisation community and by increasing competition for scarce funding.

At the state level, donors have been contributing technically and financially to the reform of the public service, with the aim of promoting greater 'transparency' and efficiency. Workshops and meetings have also been organised at the regional level, bringing together senior government officials from across the Pacific to discuss 'accountability' and 'good governance'.¹

Governance and Vanuatu

In Vanuatu, governance has gained prominence recently through the Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP). As its title indicates, this reform process, officially initiated at the beginning of 1997, is wide ranging and aims to deal with the main aspects of governance—‘renew[ing] the institutions of governance’, ‘reviewing the role and enhancing the efficiency of the public sector’, promoting private sector-led growth and ‘improving equity between sections of the population’ (Vanuatu 1997a).

Although Vanuatu’s economic and financial situation did not warrant immediate reform when the reform program was conceived (Ambrose and Siwatibau 1997)—unlike Cook Islands which is also undergoing an Asian Development Bank sponsored reform—the country’s political situation had become preoccupying. The instability of successive coalition governments and the reported inappropriate behaviour of many politicians² had led to what the authors of the CRP have labeled a ‘crisis in government’.

Vanuatu, an ex-Franco-British condominium, became independent in 1980. Until 1991, the country made up of 80 islands with a population of approximately 160,000 and vernacular languages numbering about 150, was ruled by the anglophone Vanua’aku Pati, which had led the country in its fight for independence. The 1991 split within the Vanua’aku Pati led to a fragmentation of the previous two-party system. Since then the young state has experienced a series of coalition governments, which until the 1998 elections, were headed by the main Francophone party, the Union of Moderate Parties (van Trease 1996 and Ambrose 1996). Divisions within the latter since 1995 have led to even greater instability resulting in one cabinet reshuffle, two changes of government and the kidnapping of the president by

members of the Vanuatu Mobile Force in 1996 and to a dissolution of parliament by the president at the end of 1997 (see Ambrose 1996, Ambrose and Siwatibau 1997).

Vanuatu’s political situation has deteriorated progressively with Ministers and Members of Parliament from all parties being implicated in inappropriate and even criminal conduct. Although their misdeeds have been widely reported, many have been consistently re-elected and none have voluntarily resigned. In addition, women have been consistently under-represented in political institutions, with none being elected to Parliament in the 1998 election. This points to a disfunctioning of political institutions which the instigators of the CRP have decided to address.

It is in this context that we decided to consider the relevance of the ‘governance agenda’ in Vanuatu and to seek ni-Vanuatu people’s attitudes towards it.

Searching for the *Nakamal* way

Those surveyed³ gave answers covering a broad range of areas. Rather than attempt to summarise them, we have chosen to point out the issues we feel they were most concerned about and which the ‘governance agenda’ offers an opportunity to deal with by developing what one of our respondents called the ‘*Nakamal* way’.

Custom and politics

Many of the respondents equated good governance with good government which they view as a government which is fair (treats everyone the same way), consultative (listens to the people) and efficient in the distribution of services (makes the right decisions about development and carries them out). Obviously, this is an ideal situation and does not reflect the case of Vanuatu.

In fact, when subsequently asked to explain the causes of breakdowns in

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governance, half of the respondents indicated that there is a feeling of alienation from political governance which is due to people and leaders not really understanding a system they have been 'burdened' with, and have little hope of coming to grips with without substantial education. In addition, this system is perceived as not blending in well with a much older, familiar system. Hence, perhaps the issue of governance in Vanuatu should be geared towards providing people with a better understanding of both political systems and reviewing their articulation so that they are not presented and thought of as being in opposition to each other, or as one being 'better' than the other. This process of review should allow people to take the time (which they did not have at independence and have not had since)⁴ to decide for themselves the appropriate combination and not have it foisted on them from the outside.

Some of the difficulties associated with the articulation (or lack thereof) between systems are revealed in commonly used language. For example, in Vanuatu 'politics' is frequently distinguished from 'custom' when discussing the management of public affairs.⁵ People will talk about politics when they refer to what is happening at the national or political party level, and to custom when they talk about the management of local, rural issues. For instance, in his essay 'Chiefly power in southern Vanuatu', Chief Philip Tepahae writes

...chiefs must remember and take heed that custom is the province of chiefs and not of politics. Politics is the province of the Vanuatu government but not of custom (Tepahae 1997:4).

This artificial differentiation both reveals and reinforces the gap which exists between 'imposed' institutions and 'local' institutions. It generally also has a tendency to demean custom, that is, the system under which a majority of the population is ruled, when compared to politics.

Why is this distinction made and what does it tell us? Politics is obviously a foreign word which has come into ni-Vanuatu vocabulary by way of the colonial powers, and which the latter used to describe their management of public affairs as opposed to the management of affairs by chiefs or local leaders to which they referred as 'custom'. The word 'custom' has evolved from describing products and actions used in exchange to signifying 'culture' or the rules and ways by which a society operates (Larcom 1990). The distinction between 'politics' and 'custom' was reinforced at the time of independence in Vanuatu when the national leaders fighting for independence thought of themselves as engaging in politics and acting as politicians thereby distinguishing themselves from customary leaders and proponents of 'custom'.⁶

Custom has thus come to exist in opposition to politics as though two completely distinct spheres existed with politics being thought of as more important and prestigious than custom

...today in Vanuatu a situation exists which is unsatisfactory because it is only politics which controls everything with a consequence that chiefs are no longer able to control their island and their people (Tepahae 1997:4).

While an artificial barrier separates custom from politics, paradoxically, the term 'big-man' is used both in the parliamentary and customary contexts to refer to a leader and is a source of confusion and a hindrance to governance. Although there is a perception in Vanuatu that chiefs have been neglected in the overall framework of governance, politicians frequently attribute to themselves a chiefly or 'big-man' aura (often they have been inducted as chiefs by their community to recognise their contribution or reflect their status) which they use to profit from their functions as parliamentarians (Lindstrom 1997).

This is due to a manipulation or a 'manufacturing' of custom. Some high level

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politicians for instance claim that it is uncustomary to criticise chiefs and that therefore they should not have to put up with public criticism through the media or through the ombudsman's reports. In fact, there is nothing in custom which prevents criticism or sanctioning of inappropriate behaviour by leaders (Siwatibau, pers. comm.). Rather, the attitude of those politicians, who are in this case deliberately mixing custom with politics, reflects their use of the ideology of traditionalism (Lawson 1996, 1997; Otto and Thomas 1996) or of what Futa Helu calls a 'second class of customs...[whose] function is to maintain or consolidate the power of the ruling élite' (Helu 1997:1).

So how can 'custom' and 'politics' or traditional community and state governance be better combined? Should 'custom' be better defined and held distinct from parliamentary institutions, or should the two be blended? Chief Philip Tepahae makes it clear that he does not think 'politics' and 'custom' should mix '...the government should work as the government and... custom should work as custom' (Tepahae 1997). Perhaps this is because he feels that 'politics' infringes on the way public affairs are managed or should be managed by the chiefs through custom. The space which should have been reserved for custom has, according to him, been occupied by politics. He does, however, feel that both the 'government' and chiefs have a role to play and that the former should provide the latter with more authority through a constitutional amendment and through an effort from 'parents, families, communities, teachers, chiefs and the government' (Tepahae 1997).

Various customary organisations in Vanuatu are also seeking to enhance people's knowledge about customary values and practices so that these are not subverted by politicians. The Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP) also addresses the issue

of custom and its application in the reform, but in a minimalist and extremely utilitarian way. Custom is mentioned only in the 'social equity and sustainability' section of the program and is thoroughly ignored in the 'governance and public sector management' section. In fact, custom is seen only as a tool to 'assist in mitigating adverse social effects of reform' (Vanuatu 1997b:16). Indeed, under its 'risks and assumptions' column the CRP states that it hopes that 'communities are able to draw on traditional values and resources to assist those adversely affected' and 'that custom has not been unduly undermined by changes brought about by development and CRP' (Vanuatu 1997b:16).

Key aspects of both systems, such as openness and accountability could be stressed and built on. In fact it may be more useful to identify common practices which emphasise 'good governance' characteristics such as participation and equity for all and stress these rather than oppose values and procedures of both systems and dwell on their contradictions. Paeniu (1995) provides an example in Tuvalu of how traditional and local governance can be amalgamated at the village level by creating village governments which incorporate elements from both types of governance, to replace the unpopular and central government imposed island councils. Although we are not suggesting the same solution should apply to Vanuatu, such avenues should be pursued.

Education

Many respondents saw education, in multiple forms, as a key to remedying governance problems. Education, they thought, should teach people of all backgrounds and ages what it means to be a ni-Vanuatu citizen at the end of the twentieth century. This means understanding rural conditions and skills, as well as how the public service should

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operate, reducing the gap between Francophones and Anglophones and allowing people in the villages to learn according to their own needs and specifications. Access to relevant information thus seems to be a key to improving governance.

The emphasis on education is not surprising and seems to stem from various sources.

- People correctly perceive that they are not equipped to deal with their contemporary environment unless they have access to appropriate knowledge and information.
- People in Vanuatu were for a long time deprived of formal education (Schoeffel 1997) leaving them in a vulnerable position with regards to the colonial administration and hampering their understanding of how imported institutions work today.
- Customary systems in many places are breaking down because knowledge and information is not being adequately transmitted.
- People are aware that there is something wrong about how the national government operates but don't feel they have the means to understand the causes and act on them fully.
- People see education as key to improving their social and economic conditions.

Education about the principles and values of democracy is essential but should not overshadow or replace education about customary practices.

Consultation

As much as education, improved consultation was seen as an essential factor in overcoming governance breakdowns. Respondents felt that there needed to be new avenues through which the different groups in Vanuatu could participate in the decision-making process at the different

levels: village, provincial and national.

They were aware that although a process of consultation may be time consuming, it was worth investing the time and enabling everyone to participate. There was also the understanding that it should not be a 'flash in the pan' exercise but an ongoing process which would take into account continuous social, political and economic transformations.

One time national moments such as the Constitutional Planning Committee or the CRP processes are insufficient as they may not be truly inclusive (chiefs for instance have not actively participated in the CRP National Summit although they were invited to do so); their outcomes may be rigid and static (since it will be assumed that because there was a consultation, all have agreed on the results and these should not be changed), and their results will most likely reflect the interests of the dominant parties of the time.

A wide process of ongoing consultation, would be more efficient than any combination of institutional reforms, at providing genuine decentralisation. And although governments must make decisions about issues, widespread discussion with communities, churches and specialist agencies about these issues would enhance the implementation and effectiveness of decisions and would increase people's stake in them. There is no doubt this strategy is time consuming but it has the advantage of respecting the rhythms of communities and implicating them in the future, both the short term and the long term. It also should result in better thought-out planning.

The government of Vanuatu is virtually omnipotent in its ownership of services but weak in its distribution of them. This is not a fruitful combination and is responsible for people's dependence on and dissatisfaction with the government and national politics.

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The civil service and national government

Improving the efficiency of the civil service was also seen as a significant way of overcoming breakdowns in governance. Respondents both within and outside of the civil service expressed their frustration at the lack of direction and efficiency within the public service. The 'orthodox' governance agenda, of which the CRP is an illustration in Vanuatu, probably gives adequate attention to this issue. The problems in the public service in Vanuatu are not so complex that they cannot be addressed through better utilisation of well-trained staff (there are many qualified agents in the country), additional training and enhanced coordination. However, this hinges on a more rational and responsible attitude of parliamentarians and government ministers.

Gender

Although gender was not thought of by many of our respondents to be a cause of breakdown in governance, it did appear significantly as a remedy to those breakdowns. There was a general feeling that Vanuatu politics and society should be more inclusive of women, at the customary and bureaucratic/parliamentary level, as this would improve the management of public affairs.

Gender equity is addressed by Vanuatu's CRP in its section on social equity in which it makes a commitment to 'incorporate gender awareness and gender analysis into policymaking at all levels', to establish a working group for gender equity and to adopt 'nine benchmarks of the situation of women in Vanuatu' (CRP 1997a:45) from which to monitor the progress towards gender equity.

In their analysis about the position of women in Vanuatu, the authors of the CRP state that '...the absence of one gender from positions of power is often said to be

culturally determined', while the 'benchmark of the situation of women in Vanuatu 1997' attached as an appendix, asserts that 'custom, religion and culture [are] often used as an excuse for the subjugation of women' and that 'ni-Vanuatu women are generally not considered to be equal to men in customary or contemporary society and are not generally expected or encouraged to participate in decision-making in the family, the community or government' (CRP 1997a: Attachment D).

It is true that in certain customary areas the status and role of women is not at all adapted to contemporary circumstances. At the same time, women have not been truly enfranchised through the democratic institutions.⁷ Women have little control over the political process and over economic resources. Their status has been lowered through the casting aside of certain practices⁸ and by the lack of knowledge about the respect traditionally accorded to them in certain areas.⁹ Many politicians have taken on the patriarchal characteristics of the 'west' and 'talk the language of man as though only man existed'. They have become alienated from their own culture and have lost their sense of tradition in which everyone was recognised, where all were remunerated in one way or another, regardless of who they were and where the system provided in a fair manner. As such, matrilineal systems of governance are being deliberately ignored and women's traditional rights have not been translated into the modern political and economic context.

The exclusion or non-consideration of women means that decision-makers have become accountable to only half the population and that policies are not based on a realistic assessment of the social and economic production of all ni-Vanuatu. We feel that the governance agenda provides an opportunity to review women's role and status in both 'customary and

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contemporary society' and to reassess the political system as a whole in relation to the gender issue.

Developing the *Nakamal* way

The *Nakamal* in Vanuatu serves to bring people together. In the village setting, all paths converge on the *Nakamal*. Traditionally, it also symbolises three distinct and separate places: the meeting house for the whole community; the sacred men's house (this is the sacred *Nakamal*), and the women's sacred dwelling place (which in many places no longer exists). Today there are also urban *Nakamal*, where people from various horizons meet quietly, drink kava, exchange information and discuss public issues. The idea of the '*Nakamal*' then is that it offers the opportunity for different knowledge bases to come together and share information in a common space in which all can participate.

The '*Nakamal* way' therefore symbolises a process of dialogue in which knowledge from the different components of society is distributed and commented on to be used in decision-making for the benefit of the community. It is a way of sharing customary and contemporary experiences in an inclusive and educational manner.

Today the *Nakamal* is both a customary and a redesigned space accommodating people from different horizons. *Nakamal* are not the same in structure throughout Vanuatu, but the concept of the *Nakamal* is widespread. Building on the *Nakamal* does not mean that Vanuatu must seek absolute consensus, but that its different actors: government, people, private sector, women, men, elders, youth, churches, urban and rural citizens and chiefs, must be given the opportunity to come together and communicate their needs and aspirations.

The *Nakamal* way can lead the way to appropriate governance in Vanuatu by

providing a forum for the examination of best practices, both customary and parliamentary.

Conclusion

Governance can be a potentially emancipating idea if its main objective is to promote greater participation of people and increase consultation in the democratic process. The reduction of the role of government as the dominant instrument of political decision-making and social regulation can allow other actors, and particularly community-based organisations to play a greater role. However, if the main purpose of governance turns out to be to further reduce the functions of government in order to increase the role of the market it will not lead to enhanced decision-making or to stronger democracy (Barber 1984). As Futa Helu writes, if the 'new economic orthodoxy' which 'requires everyone to cooperate in the strengthening of the private sector...succeeds, civil society in the Pacific islands countries will experience a further weakening. It could kill it altogether' (Helu 1997:4).

There is also a danger that if the governance agenda focuses on elaborating an 'artificial' civil society which consists primarily of internationally funded non-government organisations which are more or less localised, and on promoting an élite which is removed from the majority of the people, the governance agenda will further disenfranchise communities which should have direct and organised access to the state.

One of the governance agenda's greatest potentials rests in providing the opportunity to review and transform, where necessary, rules, laws and institutions, both customary and introduced so that they become more relevant to today's context. It is essential to understand the origin and logic of customs,

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laws and institutions and to judge their appropriateness. Do they contribute to people's wellbeing or are they maintained for other reasons? As Calame and Talmant found in their study of aspects of governance in France, the older laws or regulations were and the less bureaucrats knew about their historical origin, the more the laws were considered sacred or untouchable and the less bureaucrats were willing to modify them. This, they concluded, prevented effective and appropriate decision-making (Calame and Talmant 1997). This situation is by no means unique to France, and in Vanuatu's case is compounded by the legacy of the British and French administrations, the influence of various Christian churches and the frittering away or deliberate manipulation of customary practices.

It is therefore important to re-examine both customary and parliamentary governance to see how changes can be made to them so that they become more inclusive and relevant to people's needs and aspirations. However changes or adaptations of this nature are contingent on people being able to make sense of their past and of the present. The governance agenda should therefore first and foremost serve as an opportunity for people to acquire the feeling that they have a grasp on their contemporary environment. If people are not able to feel enfranchised through contemporary institutions and practices whether customary or imported, if they 'lack a sense of ownership' of them (Paeniu 1995), they should be modified accordingly.

Unfortunately, at present the governance agenda only involves people who can read and write, who can 'operate with paper' and 'operate from offices'. Even though rural communities, who constitute the majority of people in Vanuatu (80 per cent of the population), will be affected by well-meaning programs carried out with donor

assistance, they may not get the opportunity to express their own ideas about the management of public affairs. If the governance agenda fails to provide them with this opportunity, it risks remaining just a 'message from the cold'.

Vanuatu has many of the ingredients necessary to govern itself well, beginning with its knowledge of the best practices of traditional governance, drawn from a diversity of cultural backgrounds from which threads of commonality can be linked and woven into a new fabric of Vanuatu society. These existing best practices are found in the different cultures of Vanuatu, particularly in the egalitarian, achievement-oriented, matrilineal societies, but also in the patrilineal societies that claim hereditary chieftainship (even in such societies there are women of rank and status). We should therefore be looking not only at the politics of hierarchy and status but also at the frameworks of social organisation which hold the Vanuatu people together.

Vanuatu also upholds Christian values and has an understanding of the basic principles of democracy. It has formally educated decision-makers, lawyers, economists and accountants, but so far it has not put serious thought and effort into applying the right skills to the existing skill demands.

All these elements which belong to Vanuatu need to be studied further so that the best practices of the diverse societies can be incorporated into a body of a Vanuatu 'brand' of democracy and Vanuatu 'made' good governance.

Notes

- 1 On the World Bank's (1992) policy statement on 'good government', Moore states that 'one may read it as a set of signals intended to influence the thinking of the rest of the world...about what

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constitutes good government, and therefore what they [the Bank's client countries] should themselves be doing independently of the Bank' (Moore 1993b:39).

- 2 The Prime Minister of Tuvalu explains the interest in governance in the South Pacific thus

... firstly our donor partners have somewhat got frustrated and certainly fed up with the poor economic performance given by our respective countries despite the millions of dollars poured into our economies every year... and of course with the shift of our development partners' emphasis and interest to other larger regions of the world, following the end of the Cold War, we are increasingly under pressure to perform exceptionally well, making the best use of limited resources that are now being made available to us (Paeniu 1997:1).
- 3 In our survey we met with 28 representatives of various categories of ni-Vanuatu society: national politicians, national and local chiefs, public servants (national and provincial), non-governmental organisations, the private sector, women's organisations, youth groups (both rural and urban), the media and church leaders. We asked them what they understood by the term governance, what they considered to be 'good' and 'bad' governance, whether they felt there were governance problems in Vanuatu and if so, what were their causes and possible remedies. Interviews were conducted in Bislama, English and French over a 3-week period in November 1997.
- 4 At independence, there was an assumption that democracy was an extension or another word for the fairly egalitarian political systems which were in place in Vanuatu before colonialism. It was therefore thought they would blend naturally.
- 5 This is also the case in New Caledonia where French authorities have frequently

reminded the chiefs that custom is not politics and should not deal with political matters.

- 6 This idea is illustrated by Chief Tepahae's portrayal of the post-independence period as the 'period of politics' and leads him to write that 'politics is the fourth (after the church, education and the colonial administration) confusing element within custom, where customary life is already in danger' (1997:4).
- 7 The 'Benchmark of the situation of women in Vanuatu, 1997' states that 'The current political party system does not serve the needs of women, discourages their participation in party politics, and needs to undergo a complete review' (CRP 1997a: Attachment D).
- 8 For instance, in certain areas of Ambae, during menstruation, women had four or five days of complete leisure and stayed in a house away from their family. They were free of all domestic responsibilities, did not work in the gardens and were fed and looked after. This provided them with an opportunity to have their own space and time. Although in modern times this may seem like an archaic and superstitious custom, it allowed women a freedom which they do not experience today and provided them with respect.
- 9 In Ambae and other islands in the north of Vanuatu, the 'Lord' in the 'Lord's Prayer' is referred to as the 'Mother' and the highest chiefs are referred to as 'motherly' people. In the past, in the island of Aneytum, which is in southern Vanuatu, women were chiefs and landowners. This is no longer the case.

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Editors' note

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