

Unstable government in Vanuatu following snap election

By John Braddock
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Last Monday's release of the official results in Vanuatu's snap election on January 22 confirmed that growing popular opposition to the political establishment in the small Pacific Ocean island state has left no single party with a parliamentary majority.

The ruling People's Progress Party (PPP) of outgoing Prime Minister Sato Kilman was all but wiped out, with Kilman the only member to be returned. At least two main opposition parties, the Union for Moderates Party (UMP) and the Vanua'aku Pati (VP), were reduced to virtual rumps.

Despite widespread hopes that the election would end decades of political volatility, including nine changes of prime minister in the past seven years, the next parliament is set to be unstable and short-lived.

In the 52-seat parliament, there are now 17 political parties—although eight of these have just a single MP. Three parties—the UMP and VP along with the Graon mo Jastis Pati (GJP)—won six seats each. The National United Party and Iauko Group won four seats apiece while the Nagriamel Movement and the Reunification of Movements for Change each has three MPs. The Vanuatu National Development Party and the Green Confederation won two seats apiece. Eight of the elected MPs were independent candidates.

Only the GJP made ground, increasing its tally from four seats to six. Several senior politicians lost their seats, including Philip Boedoro, a former parliamentary speaker, and Robert Bohn, the former justice minister.

After intensive horse-trading, an agreement was signed last Wednesday by 11 political groupings to form a new government. The coalition includes all but one of the parties that emerged from the election with more than one MP. The *Vanuatu Daily Post* had earlier declared that the coalition would be “the most fractured in history.”

The snap election was called as a result of a bribery scandal that led to the dissolution of parliament in late 2015. Last October, 14 government MPs, over a quarter of Vanuatu's parliament, were jailed for corruption. Justice Mary Sey ruled that the accused had either given or received payments designed to influence the MPs in their capacity as public officials. Among those convicted were the parliamentary speaker, Marcellino Pipite, and Deputy Prime Minister Moana Carcasses. Carcasses was found to have paid nearly \$US452,000 to other MPs when he was in opposition in 2014.

President Baldwin Lonsdale was visiting Samoa last October when the verdict was handed down. According to Vanuatu's constitution, when the president is abroad the speaker of parliament assumes presidential powers and duties. In Lonsdale's absence, Pipite exploited his position to pardon himself and the other MPs.

When Lonsdale returned, he reversed the decision and promised to “clean the dirt” from his “backyard.” The Supreme Court upheld the reversal. The 14 MPs were all sentenced to three years in jail and banned from office for ten years. With his party decimated, Prime Minister Sato Kilman was unable to negotiate a government with the opposition. The gridlocked parliament, which had sat only once in 2015, was dissolved.

The scandal left the ruling elite in turmoil. Chief Seni Mao Tirsupe, representing hundreds of village leaders from around Vanuatu, demanded Kilman resign. The calling of the election brought forward a surge of anti-establishment sentiment. With little more than seven weeks to campaign, a total of 264 candidates registered. Most were members of 36 political parties, many of which were only formed in the lead-up to the election. More than 50 “independents” stood.

Confusion and a delay marked the publication of

candidate lists. The electoral office sent more than 20,000 replacement voter cards to the island of Tanna, where cards had been lost during Cyclone Pam last March. In addition, the electoral commission chairman said that recently eligible voters (those who turned 18 since June) could not be added to the rolls, as there was not enough time. Despite the significant difficulties, almost 113,000 out of 200,000 registered voters in Vanuatu cast ballots.

The election was held under conditions of ongoing discontent over the impact of Cyclone Pam. It left at least 24 dead and much of the country uninhabitable, with up to 70 percent of the population displaced. The inadequate international relief effort was underscored by the pittance in aid given by the region's two main powers. Australia offered just \$US3.8 million, New Zealand \$1.8 million.

Tens of thousands of people are still living in dire circumstances. The International Monetary Fund has forecast an economic decline of about 2 percent following the cyclone. The subsistence farming of coconut and kava, on which much of the population relies, is expected to take up to ten years to recover.

Last month, three major airlines, Qantas, Air New Zealand and Virgin Australia, suspended flights to Port Vila because of the capital's deteriorating runway. The crumbling airstrip has suffered from delays in upgrading, which was meant to have started in 2008. The government failed to act on a \$59.5 million agreement with the World Bank, made available last March, to fund the upgrade. With many tourist resorts empty, hundreds of workers in Vanuatu's tourism sector are facing the prospect of reduced hours and lay-offs.

Desperate social conditions are fundamentally the result of past and present imperialist domination. The tiny nations of the Pacific are among the world's most impoverished countries. Vanuatu has an annual GDP per capita of approximately \$3,276. The most recent UN Human Development Index ranked it at number 131 out of 186 countries worldwide.

Over the past three decades Vanuatu's governments, like others throughout the Pacific, have come under pressure from the international financial institutions and governments in Australia and New Zealand to carry out economic liberalisation and deregulation. Demands for strengthened law-enforcement,

“macroeconomic management capacity,” “small government,” cost cutting and improved market access have been implemented.

This agenda has led to cuts to public services, privatisation and deepening inequality. It has also produced increasing political instability as the traditional elites, based on tribal affiliations and inherited leadership positioning, have been broken up. Increasingly restive populations have come forward to oppose the deepening social divide and political intrigues.

The new Vanuatu parliament is set to open on February 11, where the first order of business, after installing the new government, will be to guarantee supply, as the 2016 budget was not passed last year.

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