

Free and Fair Elections: Societal Challenges to Vanuatu's Electoral System

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To exercise his right to vote a citizen must also be given every opportunity to make an informed choice. Information regarding candidates, parties and issues must be made available to him. In Vanuatu the right to suffrage is universal. The law allows any citizen who is at least 18 years of age and who is not in prison or confined in a mental institution to participate in regularly held elections. However, the lack of general education or a specific political awareness program negates the essence of this *right*. A substantial portion of its citizenry is illiterate. Limiting the citizens' access to political information is a limited media. Vanuatu's newspapers and news broadcasts, often subject to government censorship, reach only a fraction of the population. Equally limiting is the role of women in the male-dominated community in which the source of information and debate is a monopoly of one gender. Also, the system of kin obligation deeply imbedded in Vanuatuan culture reduces voting to an act of obedience. As a result, majority of Vanuatu's voters base their decisions on a very limited understanding of the electoral process, its participants, particularly the candidates and political parties, and issues relevant to the governance of the islands. The democratic ideal results only in disillusioned citizens and meaningless elections.

Introduction

Ideally, government is of people by the people for the people.¹

Democracy is a system in which all have the right to participate in decisions of public concern. Historically the concept developed in the Greek city states which practiced direct democracy. There, matters regarding the governance of the state were resolved literally by the will of the majority of the "demos." In modern nation states that have socio-economically and geographically diverse populations, it is impractical to have each and every citizen participating in the decision-making process. Instead, representatives are elected democratically to fulfil this function.

There are various features which are widely considered essential to the operation of representative democracies. These include mechanisms to ensure accountability of government, limits on the power of government, a choice of political parties, and government through institutions in which

the members are selected by periodic free and fair elections that provide all citizens with an opportunity to express their preferences and demands as to leaders and policies.² “Periodic free and fair elections” require the existence of an environment that allows citizens to express their preferences successfully and meaningfully. Firstly, the time period between elections, while needing to be long enough to allow each new government to settle into its role, should not be too long as this could allow an inept government to run the nation to the ground before new elections could be held.

All citizens should be free to vote and to stand for election. In order to avoid undue pressure on the voter the ballot should be secret. Citizens also need access to information about the parties and their policies in order to be able to make informed decisions. Active and free media that is accessible to all, coupled with guarantees of freedom of expression and association are necessary features to help ensure that information is disseminated effectively.

It is the concern of this paper to consider how national elections in Vanuatu are held so as to allow for the periodic free and fair election of its Parliamentary representatives. Although the degree of cultural and geographic fragmentation in Vanuatu is remarkably large, issues facing this country’s electoral system provide a useful comparison for potential problems to be found in other developing Pacific countries.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is a collection of 80 islands in the western South Pacific. Of these, 12 islands are considered to be major because of their population and size. There are 108 distinct indigenous cultures and indigenous languages within Vanuatu. The last census in 1989 placed the population at 142,630.³

Prior to independence in 1980 the collection of islands was known as the New Hebrides and was subject to joint British and French rule. One of the legacies of this is that both English and French schooling systems operate here. About 67 percent of people who receive formal education are educated in English, and 29% in French. Bislama, the local pidgin, is the most widely spoken language throughout the islands, with about 90% of the population able to speak it. Most of the people in Vanuatu can speak at least one indigenous language.⁴

There are two main urban centers, the capital, Port Vila, and Luganville. In the last census it was estimated that 18% of the population is urbanized. Outside of the urban centers, the population predominantly lives a traditional subsistence agriculture lifestyle.⁵ Vanuatu is still very much a developing country and relies heavily on overseas aid for government revenues.⁶

On a national level Vanuatu is governed by a single-chamber Parliament composed of elected representatives. Parliament and the chairman of the Local Government Councils (LGC) elect the President, who is largely a figurehead to “symbolize the unity of the nation.”⁷ The National Council of Chiefs also plays a role in the governance of the country. It acts as an advisory body to Parliament, particularly in matters of custom and tradition. It is composed of custom chiefs who are selected through District Councils of Chiefs.⁸ On a regional level LGCS, which have their own elections, carry out regional administrative duties.

Vanuatu’s Parliamentary Electoral System

The rules governing parliamentary elections in Vanuatu provide for a system of multi-member constituencies that would elect a 52-seat unicameral legislature. The country is divided into 17 constituencies and between one and six seats is allocated to each depending upon the size of the constituency.⁹

Each citizen casts one vote for his preferred candidate within the constituency. Candidates who receive the most number of votes within the constituency are elected to Parliament. If there is more than one seat available within the constituency, the next highest polling candidates take the rest of the seats. The government is then formed by the party that has a majority of elected candidates. If no one party gained an outright majority, the parties which can negotiate a coalition agreement become the majority.

Many of the operational rules of Vanuatu’s electoral system are fairly standard. There is universal suffrage every four years unless called earlier. Citizens over the age of 18, except those suffering from mental illness or serving prison terms, are allowed to vote and polling is done by way of secret ballot.

In order to discourage instability and foster cohesion within Parliament, there can be no general election called within one year of the previous one. Citizens living outside the country at the time of an election, for valid reasons are also able to vote by proxy. Except for citizens who hold positions of influence¹⁰ anybody over the age of 25 who is not bankrupt or under sentence from the courts is eligible to seek election in Parliament.

The system also contains various features designed specifically to suit Vanuatu's situation. The concept of election is new in Vanuatu and the idea of suffrage is unfamiliar to many people, especially in the more remote and less developed areas. Literacy and geographical isolation of many citizens have therefore been addressed. One of the main innovations in Vanuatu's elections is the role of registration officers. These officials are appointed to actively get people to register in the correct constituency. They visit all the villages throughout their assigned region every year, compiling and updating the electoral base with the help of the local chiefs. Other adaptations, such as taking the testimony of two people to verify someone's age in the absence of a birth certificate, also help to make the system more adjusted to Vanuatu's reality.¹¹

Polling stations are not placed simply on the basis of population density, but geographic need is also taken into account. For instance, even though the island of Merig has only 11 voters it has its own polling booth because the nearest one is very difficult to reach.¹² The ballot papers themselves do not require reading skills. Instead of written information, photographs of the candidates and their party's color and symbol are displayed on the ballot.

In order to discourage abuses, various offenses including bribery, personation, undue influence and making false statements about candidates are punishable by law.

The Electoral System of Vanuatu

The formal rules governing Vanuatu's parliamentary elections ensure that only democratically elected representatives form the government. The elections are regular, suffrage is universal, and steps have been taken to avoid undue pressure on the voters by ensuring confidentiality. In addition, allowances for Vanuatu's lack of political development have been made particularly in voter registration.

However, as stated earlier, it is also recognized that people need readily accessible information on which to base their decisions before a truly democratic selection of representatives can take place. The task of disseminating information is left to the candidates and parties. Although this is the usual way in which information is spread in developed western countries, it is argued that in a developing country such as Vanuatu this in itself is not adequate. The socioeconomic and geographical realities of this country, in which the levels of development are very disparate between rural and urban areas, indicate that unless further steps are taken to ensure that its citizens are politically informed the ideal of democratically elected representatives in Vanuatu will not be achieved.

In advancing this argument, the following factors shall be examined: the lack of general education and/or specific political awareness training, the limitations of the media in disseminating information, the role of women in the community, the influence of the *wantokk*, or kin obligation system on voting, and the peoples' growing disillusionment with the political system.

Lack of Education

It has been noted that in newly formed democracies in developing countries "[t]here is the problem of the initial capacity for assimilation and appraisal [of information] and the background training and education required to render assimilation and appraisal appropriately critical."¹³ Although illiteracy does not mean that people are incapable of sound judgment, unfamiliarity with political concepts, particularly in outlying, undeveloped areas makes it more difficult for people to readily comprehend issues outside of their own experiences.

The percentage of people who received some sort of formal education in Vanuatu is fairly high.¹⁴ According to the 1989 census, 80.6% of the population over the age of six had received some schooling. Although more urban people received schooling (93.4%), 77.9% of rural people have attended school at some point. As the population ages the number of people who attended school drops considerably, with less than 50% of females and about 67% of males over the age of 50 having attended school.

However, the percentage of people who achieved formal educational qualification, is very low. Only 34.05% of Vanuatu had obtained any sort of educational qualification. Here the difference in the level of rural and urban education becomes apparent, as only 28.9% of all rural dwellers have attained qualification, whereas 54.5% of urbanites are educationally qualified.

The nature of these qualifications also reflects upon the extent of formal education in this country. About 75% of the population holds only the Primary Leaving Certificate, obtained after six years at around age 11 or 12. Sixteen percent holds the Junior Secondary Leaving Certificate, obtained after year 10 at about age 16, and only 17% holds the Senior Secondary Leaving Certificate obtained around age 18. In 1989 there were only 130 degree holders in Vanuatu.

Since the formal education system reaches so few people, it cannot be said to be effectively equipping people with the capacity for easy assimilation and critical evaluation of information. Although this creates obvious difficulties this need is not being fully met by other methods of education and training. The only other source of training on participation in the electoral system is the Electoral Office. It provides information on the mechanics of voting, and, as the registration officers are proactive in getting people acquainted to electoral roles, education about voting rights is also spread this way. However, there is no specific non-party/ candidate political awareness training.¹⁵

Limitations of the Media

The voters' inability to acquire and process information is likewise hampered by a limited media. There are only two regular general newspapers, the *Vanuatu Weekly*, a government-owned and -controlled paper published weekly in a combination of French, English and Bislama, and the *Trading Post*, an independent newspaper published twice a week. The print run of these papers is fairly low and the circulation of these papers limited to the urban centers of Port Villa and Luganville.¹⁶

Another independent newspaper, the *Wantok*, also published monthly, is distributed throughout the islands. It has a print run of 6,000 copies and is in Bislama. However, *Wantok* is primarily focused on health and education, and does not carry stories of general political interest. It

therefore has limited impact on peoples' awareness regarding candidates or policies.

The role of newspapers in spreading information, restricted as it is by limited circulation, also faces other problems. Firstly, the adult literacy rate in Vanuatu is only 64%,¹⁷ meaning a substantial number of voters are unable to read the papers. Secondly, written language has never been a traditional source of Communication and is not relied upon as much as aural means of communication, even where newspapers are accessible.

Vanuatu's aural media consist of two radio stations and one television station, all government-owned. Although there are no recent broadcast statistics available, it is estimated that about 95% of the population has access to AM radio. News services in Bislama, English and French are provided daily. During weekdays there is a total of one hour of news in Bislama and 20 minutes each of English and French news. During weekends there is no English or French news, but 35 minutes of Bislama news on Saturdays and 30 minutes on Sundays.

The weekday news is divided into four time slots, and there is repetition in the news, so a full hour of news is not carried each day. However, the television broadcast reaches only Port Vila, Luganville and two of the other major islands. It carries 30 minutes of news from Mondays to Fridays. The reports are in French, English and Bislama.¹⁸

Just as limited as newspaper circulation is media freedom. Although all political parties are able to purchase radio and television air time at an equal cost, the right to publish and broadcast is however not absolute. In June 1995 the Minister's Office issued a ban on the circulation of all information on nuclear testing, including broadcasts of foreign reports.¹⁹ A more recent evidence of this saw government issue a gag order on the controversial issue of the illegal sale of passports by various ministers.²⁰

Because of limited access to information, most people acquire election-related information through word of mouth. However, information received in this manner is less accurate.²¹ It is not subject to the checks that publication provides by way of having it produced in a form and accessible to those who might disagree with it. The potential for information to be given selectively also increases. A balance of information from various sources, be it political commentary in the media or opposing

views from other parties which may not have the same access to any particular audience²² is also less likely to occur.

The Role of Women

Information spread primarily by word of mouth also means that various sectors of the community which do not participate in political discussions are cut off and are unable to fully participate in the electoral process. As in many societies, regardless of formal equality of suffrage and other rights, the social status of women in Vanuatu makes them the largest group to be hindered this way.

The Vanuatu way of life tends to be revolve around the males, with male chiefs as the head of villages.²³ Women are “[e]xpected to be industrious, obedient, loyal, submissive...”²⁴ and these expectations are at their strongest in the public sphere in which politics is found.

Women find themselves isolated from political debate. The usual time for discussion is in the *nakamal*, over a shell of *kava*.²⁵ However, women do not customarily drink *kava*, and are not welcome in the *nakamal*, so are therefore kept away from the main source of political information and debate. As one local woman puts it: “The men go to the *nakamal* to make decisions and drink *kava*... So by keeping women from the *kava* they can't take part in making decisions.”²⁶

Even though the ballot is secret, ensuring that a woman's obedience cannot be checked, women still find themselves unable to make electoral decisions on their own. This is because they gain political information only through men. As women tend to be less educated,²⁷ this also may encourage a larger degree of their dependence on the views of males.

The Wantok System

Another aspect of traditional life, the *wantok* system,²⁸ has the potential to interfere with the practice of fully informed voting. The *wantok* is a system of kin obligation in which one's relatives and people from the same village or clan are obliged to support their *wantok*. All support is reciprocal. ‘Support’ is interpreted very widely, and extends to voting for one's *wantok*.

This is not necessarily a negative thing, as a *wantok* may well be the voter's best representative in Parliament, having come from a similar

background. However, Parliament does not operate in such a way as to make it possible for its members to reciprocate in expected ways, such as channeling money to *wantok* in need. As there is a lack of education regarding how the parliamentary system works, it appears that this may not be fully understood. It may also result in people simply voting for their *wantok* rather than arriving at a decision based on a study of all of the candidates. Again, education is the key to giving people a more realistic perception of what their *wantok*, and other candidates, are actually able to do for them.

Disillusionment

Disillusionment is a distinct factor since it does not stem from either Vanuatu's developing status or lack of familiarity with the fairly new system of government. Rather, it is symptomatic of a loss in faith in government,

Although the past elections in Vanuatu exhibited high voterturnout,²⁹ there is a growing disillusionment resulting from perceived corruption, wastage and inefficiencies within government. It is hard to speculate on the potential extent and effect of this sentiment, but the collective frustration does not go unexpressed. The most visible indication of the disillusionment has so far been the riots that took place on January 16, 1998 triggered by alleged corruption within the Vanuatu National Provident Fund.³⁰

Instability within Parliament is rife and since the 1995 elections, Vanuatu has seen three changes of government and eight changes of Ministers.³¹ This instability is coupled with a rising awareness about corruption within Parliament. On July 15, 1994, Vanuatu's first Ombudsman was appointed in response to complaints about public administration. In its first year of operation, the Ombudsman's Office received 62 complaints, and opened 53 files for investigation.³² Since that time reports have been published on subjects including political appointments to positions,³³ improper use of ministerial powers,³⁴ and incompetence.³⁵

These are just some of the problems that have surfaced recently in government. As exercising one's vote does not seem to make any difference to the nature of the government, this could however affect voters turnout. In the Vila municipal elections in 1997 the turnout was only 23.75%,⁶⁶ which could be indicative of a loss of faith in voting.

Although disillusionment is not in itself a result of an inefficient electoral system, it is a clear reminder that the electoral system is only as good as the rest of the democratic system.

Conclusion

Each of these factors, regardless of the adequacy or inadequacy of the Vanuatu electoral system, prevents the elections from meeting any sort of democratic ideal. The lack of education or training makes it harder to assess properly whatever information is available. That both education is weak and information is not available to the citizens, especially in rural areas, means that the introduced electoral system comes up against greater barriers from custom than might otherwise be found. Conflicts exist between traditional power structures and the introduced democratic electoral system, but the effects of these conflicts do not seem to be a matter of concern.

The Electoral Office or a neutral body must take a proactive role to ensure that adequate and appropriate information is disseminated throughout Vanuatu. Not only must care be taken to distribute comprehensive and balanced information, but the same must be received by its target audience. Successful targeting will involve selecting media which can present information and issues within the comprehension of the intended audience.

In conjunction with making information accessible to all, voters must be provided the skills needed to process the information. The present schooling system does not meet this requirement, and it is not likely to do so for many years. Vanuatu needs alternative methods of raising awareness through specific adult education training programs.

Issues on how custom and traditional life interact with the introduced system do not have any easy solutions. Such issues should be debated upon openly. The debate must not be confined to or directed by academic or policy advisors, but by all of Vanuatu's citizens. However, the academicians and advisors do have a role in bringing issues into the public forum.

Even if all of these steps are taken it must be remembered that once disillusionment sets in and voters turnout decline, the democratic ideal will not be achieved. Aside from making sure the system itself operates

meaningfully, confidence in the entire democratic system must be maintained. For if this is lost, even the best designed electoral system becomes pointless.

Endnotes

- 1 Grace Mera Molisa, "Democracy (a poem)" in Crombe et al (eds) *Culture and Democracy in the Pacific* (University of the South Pacific: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1992), p. 29.
- 2 For general discussion on the nature and characteristics of liberal democracies and their electoral systems see Derbyshire and Derbyshire, *World Political Systems* (Chambers, Scotland, 1991), pp. 33-34.
- 3 See Whyte (ed) *Vanuatu: 10 Vanuatu 10 Yia Blong Independens* (Australia: Other People Publications, 1990), chap. 2.
- 4 Republic of Vanuatu Statistics Office, *Vanuatu National Census, May 1989* (Vanuatu: Main Report Statistics Office, 1991), pp. 47-48.
- 5 *Ibid.* pp 49-54. In 1989 about 75% of the working population, whether paid or not, were engaged in agriculture. Of people engaged in agricultural occupations, about 60% were subsistence farmers and 22% were market gardeners, selling some of their produce, even though much of what was grown may have been for private consumption.
- 6 According to S. Headley, "Aid is the source of about half of government revenues and underwrites over 90% of the development budget." in S. Headley, *The South Pacific Foreign Affairs Handbook* (Australia: Allan & Unwin, 1992), P. 209.
- 7 Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu, Article 33.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Part V.
- 9 In January 1998 the number of seats increased from 50 to 52 and the number of constituencies from 15 to 17.
- 10 Examples of exempted people are the President of Vanuatu, judges and magistrates, members of the police force, members of the National Council of Chiefs, public servants, members of the teaching service and members of the Citizenship Commission.
- 11 Van Trease, II (ad.) *Melanesian Politics: Stael Blong Vanuatu* (Center for Pacific Studies University of Canterbury and Institute of Pacific Studies University of the South Pacific: Macmillan Brown, 1995), pp. 159-163.
- 12 *Ibid.*, P. 161.
- 13 Hyland, *Democratic Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.225.
- 14 Statistics in the following section come from *Vanuatu National Census, May 1989 Main Report*, Republic of Vanuatu Statistics Office, 1991, pp. 43-47.
- 15 Interview with Mr. Malessas Gulan, Senior Information Officer, Electoral Office, January 22, 1998.
- 16 *Vanuatu Weekly* has a print run of 2,000 and only goes to the main centers in Vanuatu (information supplied by Ambong Thompson, employee at the Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association, January 22, 1998). The *Trading Post* has a print run of 2,000 midweek and 2,500 on Saturdays. Currently, its main method of being distributed to the islands is through the copies supplied to Vanair, the domestic airline. The *Trading Post* is increasing its print run and its distribution to the outer islands over the next 12 months.
- 17 Asian Development Bank Human Resource Development, *Smaller Pacific Island Countries Office of Pacific Operations*. Asian Development Bank, 1995, p.5.
- 18 Information on radio and television broadcasts supplied by Ambong Thompson, employee at the Pacific Broadcasting Association, January 22, 1998.

- 19 Index on Censorship, Vol. 4, 1995, p.192.
- 20 "Bong Slaps Media Outlet With Court Order,' in *Vanuatu Weekly*, October 25, 1997, p.2. The newspaper ran a story about the gagging writ itself.
- 21 Anecdotal stories of chiefs limiting the access of particular candidates to their villages make this a real concern. It has recently been reported that some chiefs are wont to start charging parties who want to campaign in their villages, as too many promises have been broken in the past ("Chiefs Want to Charge for Political Campaigns," *Trading Post* Port Vila Vanuatu Issue 315, January 28, 1998, p.4.
- 22 It should be noted that no research on the effect of traditional chiefly system on how people vote is available. However, it is recognized that 'people must follow [their chiefs' instructions and regulations or be punished.'" Lim et al *Vanuatu, Twenti wan tingting long team blong independens*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- 23 *Ibid*, p. 43. The exact powers of the chief, and how one becomes a chief vary amongst cultures, but political power is generally held by males.
- 24 *Ibid*, p.257.
- 25 *Kava* is a root that is made into a drink with mild narcotic effects. The *nakamal* is the place in which kava is drunk and discussions take place.
- 26 Lebot et. al., *Kava the Pacific Dnig* (United States: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 137-138.
- 27 A total of 45,252 males had attended some sort of schooling as compared to 40,150 females in 1989. Males are also more highly qualified, with 16,153 males obtaining some sort of qualification as compared to 13,001. At degree level, there were 106 males as compared to 24 females (n5, pp 45-46).
- 28 For an explanation of the *Wantok* system in Papua New Guinea, which operates in the same manner as the *Wantok* system in Vanuatu, see Monsell-Davis, *Safety Net or Disincentive? Wantokks and Relatives in the Urban Pacific*, National Research Institute Discussion Paper 72, National Research Institute, Papua New Guinea, 1993, pp 1-5.
- 29 1979: 89.7%, 1983: 74.7%, 1987: 80.8%, 1991: 71.3% see n12, p.161. These percentages are the number of qualified voters who voted. The writer is unsure how many people over the age of 18 are unregistered. in 1995, 76.64% voted, with the lowest turnout being in the urban centers of Vila (51.2%) and Luganville.
- 30 See Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman, *Public Report on the Vanuatu National Provident Fund Housing Loan Scheme*, December 17, 1997.
- 31 Personal communication with Beverly Naviti, employee at the Parliamentary Chambers, January 27, 1998.
- 32 Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman, *First Annual Report to Parliament*, 1995, p. 14.
- 33 *Ibid*. p.1434. See also Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman *Public Report on the Conduct of Hon. Amos Bangabit, Hon. Madme Carlot Korman and Mr. Irene Bongnam on the Granting of the Contract to Clean Bauerfield Airport to FX & BM Cleaning Services* October 25, 1996 and Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman *Public Report of VCMB Utilization of the VT 1.3 Billion 1986-1987 Stabex Fund Subsidy*, August 6, 1996.
- 34 See Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman, *Public Report on illegal ex gratia payments to 23 1998 Former MPs*, June 4, 1997 and Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman *Public Report on Nambawan Bottle Shop Case*, August 20, 1996.
- 35 Republic of Vanuatu Office of the Ombudsman, *Public Report on the Provision of Bank Guarantees Given the Sum of US \$100,000,000*, July 3, 1996, in which it stated in p. 2 that the 'Finance Ministry and bankers [are] either pitifully ignorant or criminally negligent."
- 36 Electoral Commission Publication of Results of Port Vila Municipal Elections of March 1997. The previous elections in March 1993 had a turnout of 51% (Electoral Commission Publication of Results of Port Vila Municipal Elections of March 22, 1993.