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South Pacific

*Governance and
political process in Kiribati*

Barrie Macdonald

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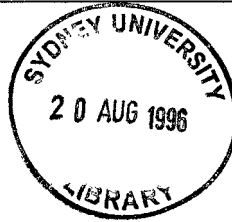
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Abstract

This paper links recent research on 'good governance' in the Third World to a Pacific Islands case study. The paper challenges the validity of the ideologically-driven approach adopted by the World Bank and other major donors and suggests that standard checklists of good governance characteristics make insufficient allowance for cultural diversity, historical context, local economic circumstances or the dynamics of political process. Twin templates of governance and political process are used to analyse the politics and economy of Kiribati. The report shows that Kiribati as a nation is highly literate, has a guarantee of basic human rights, and a political process that provides for a high level of formal representation and informal participation. In recent years, however, economic performance has been poor and, from a governance perspective, attention should be directed to public sector management, the high level of aid dependence, and the dominance of the government within the economy. The report also suggests that any improvement in the effectiveness of aid delivery will depend not only on improved public sector performance in Kiribati but also on greater donor recognition of the realities of the *I-Kiribati* world and a demonstrated willingness to recognise the policies and priorities of the government of Kiribati.

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Introuduction

Although 'governance' has become a significant feature of the international aid and development debate in the 1990s, the issue has, as yet, had little impact on relations between donor and recipient nations in Oceania. Nor has it featured prominently in the academic literature on Pacific studies. Issues of governance have surfaced in the examination of post-colonial politics in Pacific Islands countries but seldom in a manner that engages the broader international debate (see, for example, Lal and Nelson 1995). This publication uses the Republic of Kiribati as a case study to explore the possibilities of a governance approach that would emphasise the importance of political process rather than a checklist of 'good government' characteristics.

The governance or 'good government' debate has diverse origins. The ending of the Cold War prompted Western donors to place less emphasis on political expediency and security imperatives in the allocation of overseas development assistance. Donor governments became sensitive to declining public support for aid flows to apparently corrupt regimes and dictatorships. It was necessary to define a new philosophy and rationale for the continued provision of development assistance to the Third World. The World Bank has taken a leading role in promoting discussion and definition of the terms of the debate (World Bank 1991, 1993). The Bank's stance suggests that poor governance is a major cause of economic failure and, as a corollary, that political factors are central to economic restructuring and public sector reform. It can also be interpreted as an attempt to allay concerns that poor development performance might be caused by fundamental flaws in the macroeconomic policies advocated by the Bank itself.

A World Bank report on development in sub-Saharan Africa in 1989 is seen as a landmark study of governance issues, and precursor to major changes in policy emphasis by OECD governments (Leftwich 1993:610; Moore 1993b). The recurring criteria for good government in the literature are legitimacy, participation, transparency, the rule of law, guaranteed human rights, and effective public sector management.

Underpinning all of these themes is an assumption that participatory democracy is not only a desirable end in itself but is the key to good governance and, in turn, to economic development and social justice. The governance agenda has taken on a wider currency, with some attempt to argue for the application of governance principles to the international order (Falk 1995; Held 1995) and for a greater role for NGOs (Gordenker and Weiss 1995). NGOs are acquiring greater significance because they are seen to reflect the institutional pluralism integral to the governance agenda and also because they have raised public awareness of issues central to the reform agenda in both donor and recipient countries.

To date, the governance debate (and policy statements from donors) has concentrated largely on the characteristics of good governance and on the difficulties which lie in the way of implementing such an agenda. There has been little progress beyond the use of funding pressure to secure reform—an approach requiring a unified approach by donors and, in any case, tackles problems only when they are of major proportions.

External pressure for reform implies conditionality and, implicitly, an attack on sovereignty. The effectiveness of the conditionality approach can be questioned. While there is some evidence that conditionality may have some impact in the short term (at least until the recipient regains some choice), it is of little lasting benefit unless there is united pressure from donors over a sustained period (Robinson 1993). There is also a fundamental conflict of principle between the advocacy of democracy and external constraints of the economic options open to government.

In other aspects as well, the current approaches to governance adopted by the World Bank and other major donors seem flawed. First, the link between democratisation and economic growth is, at best, unproven. Indeed the relative performance of some OECD and East Asian economies over the past few decades might suggest otherwise. Secondly, there is a further assumption that the basic principles of good governance are sufficiently universal to be universally applicable—an assumption that seems to take little account of local circumstances. The World Bank approach takes no account of cultural diversity and lacks the subtlety to cope with mechanisms for participation and transparency that may not meet strict 'democratic' criteria but may work in a specific cultural context. In the case of the island nations of Oceania, the model ignores the importance of such factors as smallness, remoteness, territorial fragmentation and a narrow resource base, all of which predetermine the nature and scale of much economic activity.

From World Bank policy documents, and donor guidelines, a template of good governance characteristics can be defined. Despite inevitable overlap and blurring around the edges, common issues can be identified and grouped.

- **Constitutional and government issues:** government by consent; formal representation; public participation; accountability; predictability; openness; constitutional review
- **Human rights:** basic human rights; women's rights; freedom of speech, media and association; universal education; freedom of movement
- **Legal issues:** legal structure; the rule of law; the judiciary; protection of contract; protection of property rights
- **Public sector management:** independence of the Public Service; skill levels of the Public Service; policy formation and implementation; accountability and audit; technology
- **Resource acquisition and allocation:** government revenue; allocation and decision-making; project consultation; private sector development; corporatism and institutional pluralism; military spending.

The difficulty with this approach is that it is overly dependent on the assessment of characteristics in the present and takes insufficient account of cultural diversity, historical context, local economic circumstances or the dynamics of political process. A template of this kind helps to define what a government is, and how it behaves, and might be used to assess the quality of its governance and to give it a score on a report card. What it will almost certainly not explain is how a government works. Economic policies or development strategies designed according to supposedly universal formulae or models, however well planned or intentioned, will be pre-programmed to fail if they do not take sufficient account of the local cultural environment and political process.

To understand the political process, a specific exploration of cultural values, social organisation, individual and community expectations and aspirations, and perceptions of the nature and purpose and government is needed. Ideology and policy both depend to some extent on formal definition and articulation. It may be more useful to try to tease out the assumptions that underlie government and the development process from individual through community to the national level (Macdonald 1995: 25).

This led to a second template of issues that, especially for the benefit of foreign observers and external agencies, might give greater insight into the dynamics of political process and governmental capacity and thus lead to a deeper

understanding of the factors affecting the development process in a specific context. The template's principle features were

- **foundations:** social foundations; economic conditions; constitutional structure; local government structure
- **political process:** traditional élites; modern élites; urban dwellers and migrant workers; the nature of leadership; politicians and people; governments and people; politicians and parties; parties and governments; politicians, parties and policies; constitutional issues; policies and public perceptions; the policy process; policy formation in practice; aid donors and policy formation
- **role of the public service:** historical influences; employment in the public service; performance and accountability; policy processes; government companies and corporations.

As an experiment, these templates were applied to the Republic of Kiribati in mid-1995. In the first section of the paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the political anatomy of Kiribati in a way not previously recorded in the literature. The findings suggest, at the very least, that fundamental tensions exist between 'the government' and 'the people' and that these are both controlled and mediated through the electoral process. These tensions, which help to ensure that the government remains responsible, responsive and accountable, also create barriers to the formulation and maintenance of long-term policies, the reform of public sector management, and the privatisation of the economy. In this case, at least, the twin pillars of neoclassical economics and participatory democracy, which support the World Bank's approach to governance, seem to be leaning in opposite directions.

In the second section of the paper, the governance template is briefly applied to the current situation in Kiribati. According to the research summary provided here, the Republic of Kiribati would score well against governance criteria in areas of human rights, participatory democracy, and the rule of law, and would show weakness in the areas of economic performance and public sector management. While these conclusions might be of some value (if unremarkable) in themselves, they would be less useful than the analysis of political process in suggesting ways of constructing a more effective development strategy for Kiribati.

If the findings have a more general application, the validity of any centrally derived prescription or formula might be challenged, providing a case for less centralisation in agencies like the World Bank, and more research designed to produce understanding of the mechanisms that inhibit development in specific developing countries. While generic difficulties may stand in the way of achieving economic growth and good government in them, there must also be recognition that each set of reforms will take place in a distinct cultural environment which must shape the solutions just as it has helped to shape the problems.

Political process in Kiribati

The underlying principles, public perception of, and attitudes towards, politics and politicians in Kiribati remain fundamentally unchanged despite changes in form and process in Kiribati politics since independence. There are significant mechanisms that maintain accountability in the political process, most important of which is the power of the traditional élite, particularly the power of the *unimane* (the old men who are traditional leaders of *I-Kiribati* society). The small population, the tightly integrated nature of village communities, and high levels of literacy are also important in maintaining the transparency of the political process. The expectations that the people have of their politicians, cultural restraints on individual wealth and asset accumulation, and the inherent suspicion that 'the people' have of 'the government' create tensions that are both controlled and mediated through the national electoral process. These same tensions on the other hand, also create barriers to the formulation and maintenance of long-term policies, the reform of public sector management, and the privatisation of the economy.

In modern Kiribati, wealth and direct political power is concentrated in the hands of the Western-educated political-bureaucratic élite which is generally concentrated on South Tarawa. Behaviour within this élite is constrained by cultural norms and values which are integral to *I-Kiribati* society. In particular, there is an expectation that individual interests will be subordinated to those of the family and community. Individual displays of wealth, personal aggrandisement, or leadership by direction lead to community censure.

These values associated with *te katei ni Kiribati* (the Kiribati way) are reinforced informally, as well as through the formal political process, by the *unimane*. Informal island councils of *unimane* still have significant influence in the election of Members of the House of Assembly and the President, and remain a powerful force in local government. Community leaders seek to maintain ultimate control over the shape

and direction of a central government which is often viewed with some suspicion and perceived as having interests and impulses which are fundamentally at variance with those of 'the people'.

A fundamental characteristic of Kiribati elections is that politicians are elected on the basis of personal achievements rather than as representatives of any party, organisation, policy, class or ideology. Political parties may reflect common positions among politicians, but they fundamentally exist as creations by, and for, the politicians themselves. The 1994 presidential campaign, which saw a commitment to policies to increase the copra price and to abolish some school fees, was the first occasion on which such specific policy commitments had been made in the course of a presidential election and may represent a new phase in *I-Kiribati* politics.

Ideally, in *I-Kiribati* society, leadership is consensual, avoiding confrontation or the public criticism or embarrassment of others. Leaders should be seen as expressing a community view. Because leadership was traditionally exercised by men, women seldom speak in public meetings and only three have ever been elected to parliament. The absence of a Westminster-style party system forces individuals to rely on personal qualities to secure election, with governments subsequently formed by negotiation among politicians. In recent elections, however, parties have assumed increasing importance, especially in the selection of the candidates for the national presidential election by the Members of the House of Assembly.

While parties remain the creations and creatures of the politicians, the two major political groupings are now canvassing support on the outer islands. There is a recognition among politicians that collective action is not only the path to political power but that, for stability, governments must sustain a majority on more than a day-to-day basis. Even so, no party has yet built a popular membership, and most do not have an independent life outside of the legislature and elections. It is inevitable, however, that political parties will continue on their evolutionary path, and that there will be a growing electoral demand for the definition of policy and commitment to specific undertakings at least at the presidential level.

The dependence of individual politicians on a volatile electorate—some 45 per cent of politicians have lost their seats at recent elections—also generates a hesitation about tackling contentious issues. This hesitation, together with the absence of a formal party structure or any driving principle or ideology within government, limits the commitment of governments to policies. There is a more common tendency to 'sell' the qualities of the leader and a broad approach to government issues.

Such a political structure poses difficulties for policy formation and implementation. The decolonisation and post-independence years have seen the development and consolidation of protocols and structures that reaffirm the constitutional pre-eminence of ministers over public servants. Most policy formulation, however, involves third parties

as well as politicians and their advisers. In particular, and to some extent by default, aid donors play a significant role in policy formation to the extent that 'ownership' of a given initiative, policy, or project may effectively pass to the donors. Moreover, the limited policy-formation capacity of the Kiribati government, and the requirements and conditions imposed by donors, effectively erode *I-Kiribati* participation and undermine the effectiveness of the development process.

The Public Service is perceived as a source of safe employment, and an agency for wealth distribution and, in effect, of welfare provision. This perception, together with *I-Kiribati* attitudes to employment, management and the role of government, and the centralised nature of the former colonial regime, have left a powerful heritage in the form of a Public Service which is hierarchical, status conscious and tends to explore and administer policy initiatives from above (ministers) and outside (aid donors) rather than developing alternatives from within. Cultural restraints which make it difficult for managers to manage together with an inadequate bureaucracy, means the government often finds it difficult to provide service in more than a minimal way, and that government-owned 'commercial' activities have difficulty in operating efficiently.

In pre-colonial times, residence on small, scattered, drought-prone islands made subsistence a predominant concern of all *I-Kiribati*. Working the land was a fundamental family and community obligation. With the modernisation of *I-Kiribati* culture, that obligation remains, though it might be performed through employment and remittance income. Since the exhaustion of the phosphate deposits on Banaba, there have been no large-scale industries except for the licensing of foreign fishing operators—Kiribati's Exclusive Economic Zone being a rare example of when geographic fragmentation has proved an asset. Establishing communications and other services in a manner that provides at least some opportunity for economic and social improvement for those living on outer islands is generally costly.

There is an inevitable tension between external pressure towards the privatisation of the economy and *I-Kiribati* preferences for collective economic activity and cultural restraints on individual wealth, with strong traditional preferences for cooperative economic activity. Similarly, there is little enthusiasm for individual saving despite, or perhaps because of, the development of a strong tradition of community savings.

The constitutional structure of Kiribati combines with a strong cultural heritage to provide a political system that is transparent, responsive, publicly accountable, and provides for alternative approaches while incorporating mechanisms that have allowed for orderly changes of government. These same structures, which reflect traditional perceptions of leadership and public behaviour, together with the scale of government and the scattered, impoverished nature of the country, also impose restraints on effectiveness of government in policy formation and implementation and the efficient management of national resources. This inherent tension within the political process and

government of Kiribati may present difficulties for aid donors who fail to appreciate local conditions and constraints, and the ease with which local participation in development may be undermined and *I-Kiribati* 'ownership' or policies and projects eroded by external requirements and conditions.

Foundations

Social foundations

I-Kiribati identify primarily with family, village, and island; national identity remains a fragile concept introduced under colonial rule and nurtured by a common administrative structure and the economic dependence that ties the archipelagic periphery to central government. A sense of continuing loyalty to kin and locality is reinforced by distinctive local histories, diversity of custom, variation in dialect and significant differences of island size, geography and climate. Even so, some common principles can be defined.

The *maneaba*—in its physical sense a large, thatched, rectangular, community meeting house—is the focus of village life and, beyond that, the embodiment of the fundamental principles and values of *I-Kiribati* society (Maude 1980). Its contemporary role, and the socio-political spectrum within which *I-Kiribati* societies fall, is best explained in an evolutionary way. Ancient *I-Kiribati* society was probably based on village districts under the control of clan leaders although land tenure studies would suggest that there was also a strong emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities. Samoan invasions, generally dated to the 14th century, saw the introduction of hierarchical, chiefly principles and the division of most islands into districts which lived in a state of endemic rivalry and warfare across fluid boundaries. In a series of battles in the 17th century, the *maneaba* principles of 'meeting house democracy' with power vested in councils of old men—each of them clan leaders—was firmly imposed (perhaps reimposed) on all islands south of the equator, and had a modifying influence on chiefly power on the islands to the north (Maude 1963). In the 19th century Butaritari and Abemama, and their respective satellite islands, had strong centralised chiefdoms based to a significant degree on the capacity of their leaders to capitalise on a growing European presence and the weapons and trading opportunities that were integral to it (Macdonald 1982: 1–30).

In general, then, the societies of the southern Gilbert Islands were strongly egalitarian and gerontocratic, with power in the hands of *maneaba* councils of old men (*unimane*); these traditions were much weaker in the northern and central Gilberts where *maneaba* councils were less firmly imposed on a local chiefly structure, and land less evenly distributed. Chiefly authority was steadily and deliberately eroded as a matter of policy throughout the colonial period to the point where, by the late 1960s, chiefs were no longer given statutory recognition though some landholding privileges

remained. While informal, village-based, *maneaba* councils now exist on all islands, it must be remembered that, in some regions, greater weight is still given to the views of those descended from the former chiefly families.

Within the *maneaba*, protocols were strictly defined; each clan had its own sitting-place, or *boti* and, for formal occasions, each *boti* or clan had a senior male as its designated spokesman. *Maneaba* councils resolved disputes, controlled and maintained community assets, provided hospitality for visitors, and acted as a community court and social centre. In effect, the *maneaba* was arbiter over all relationships beyond, and sometimes within, the immediate family (Maude 1963).

The relationship of the individual through the family to the community was the basis of identity and social standing and obligation. Individual interests were subordinated to those of the family and community, and a high value placed on conforming to community norms. Personal aggrandisement led only to community censure. The harsh atoll environment helped to create, and reinforce, these values. Houses, canoes, special skills, genealogies, magic spells and even trees were valued as possessions, but the fundamental possession and resource around which all others revolved was land (Lundsgaarde 1974; Macdonald 1982: 9–10, 206–209).

On islands under strong chiefly rule, individuals and families occupied lands at the pleasure of the chief, and provided produce and services in return. Elsewhere, defined areas of land, the lagoon or reef might be community-owned but, for most lands and food pits—for the cultivation of the taro-like *babai* (*Cyrtosperma chamissonis*)—the emphasis was always upon individual ownership of defined, and named, plots of land. A piece of 'land' might be several hectares in extent or only a few square metres; ownership of a piece of land might be separated from the ownership of trees growing upon it.

Landownership and boundaries were the most contentious issue within and among families. Land and food pits were inherited by males and females from both mothers and fathers though, generally speaking, sons received more than daughters, and older children more than younger. In more recent times, especially for land that has been leased to government, it has become more common to defer the reallocation of lands on the death of their owner and to maintain collective ownership among descendants until a formal decision becomes necessary or is forced by a family member. The pattern of land inheritance, combined with restrictions on marriage to any relative closer than a fourth cousin and a preference for residence within the husband's *kainga* (family-based hamlet), meant that, with island populations being so small, the landholdings of any individual might well be scattered across several islands and, therefore, difficult to use on a regular basis. As the most precious commodity, land could also be presented for adoption, marriage, or special services, or seized by the community as punishment or compensation. Working the land and gathering food and other resources was a

fundamental family and community obligation. That obligation remains in modern Kiribati, though it might now take a variety of forms.

In communities that have always had a difficult if not marginal existence on poorly-resourced islands, a sharp awareness of wage employment first developed in the 19th century together with an acceptance of the migration that helps ensure the longer-term well-being of the family. Even those in remote villages place a premium on Western education because wage employment is seen to provide a much brighter future than a traditional village existence. This view has been reinforced by the steady decline in real terms of the price for copra—the only commercial commodity produced on many islands—over half a century or more.

An individual identifies with kin and the ancestral lands of both parents even if s/he has never visited the lands in question. Regular remittances are a well-established feature of labour migration and wage employment. Links between members of this modern élite, who necessarily live in major centres, and their outer island relatives and communities, remain strong. Young men and women are expected to seek wage employment, and yet to remain largely unaffected by it. Migration and remittances are now acceptable ways of discharging family obligations. Inevitably, with urbanisation and a high level of overseas employment, *unimane* power has remained strongest on the outer islands.

Economic conditions

In the past decade, Kiribati has experienced little economic growth. In real terms, per capita incomes and standards of living have steadily eroded over the past decade. Overall GDP growth was only 1 per cent per annum between 1984 and 1993, a decline in real per capita terms of almost 2.5 per cent per annum. With the impact of earnings from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and remittances, however, GNP per capita for the same period grew at an annual rate of 0.4 per cent (Fairbairn 1992). (More than a thousand merchant seamen working overseas account for 10 per cent of wage employment; collectively, they remit some A\$5 million a year to families in Kiribati.) A 1995 economic review put per capita GNP at A\$1,060 and per capita GDP at A\$617 which is the lowest among the small Pacific Islands states.

In looking at GDP by sector from 1982 to 1993, the most notable features are increases for government activity from 24.3 per cent to 31 per cent, and for fishing from 5.9 per cent to 9.8 per cent. On the other hand, transport and communications decreased from 20.7 per cent to 15.9 per cent, and agriculture (commercial and subsistence) from 18.5 in 1982 to 8 per cent in 1993. The major source of government revenue in recent years has been licence fees from foreign operators for the exploitation of Kiribati's Exclusive Economic Zone. The figures largely reflect the country's smallness, remoteness, geographic fragmentation and lack of exploitable resources. These are intrinsic restraints on economic development to which must be added, for most of the last

decade and a half, poor prices for copra and fish, the two major exports. (In response to these conditions, the cultivation of seaweed for export has developed rapidly on some lagoon islands over the past decade, in some years earning more foreign exchange than copra.)

All of these factors impose barriers to the achievement of the basic macroeconomic goals of improving economic growth, diversifying the economy, reducing aid-dependence and improving standards of living. Kiribati relies heavily on official development assistance, mostly for capital investment which is concentrated in the areas of infrastructure, administration, health and education. Aid flows account for nearly half of GDP. About 25 per cent of the adult population is engaged in some form of cash employment, compared with nearly 50 per cent working only in the subsistence sector; the balance of the population is engaged in home duties or not in the labour force.

A feature of the past decade has been the emergence of small businesses on South Tarawa. Small village stores and various bus operators compete for business and, more recently, there has been a strong growth in the local fishing industry. Some of these businesses are owned by individuals and some by families. Collective ownership, which is rather more in tune with traditional preferences towards cooperative economic activity (particularly in the southern Gilbert Islands), is also present with island associations on South Tarawa, with both major churches being significant players. At the 1990 census, only 9 individuals (as distinct from companies or voluntary organisations) listed themselves as employers, and most of these would have been among the non-*I-Kiribati* section of the population. These same trends towards commercial development are also evident on the outer islands, though not to the same extent. Alongside the growing retail sector, there are a number of local businesses in construction and vehicle maintenance. There is a high casualty rate among these small businesses, many of which operate without bothering to secure a trading licence. A policy of corporatisation (leading to privatisation) introduced by governments in the 1980s and early 1990s has been marked by a lack of success with serious management and financial difficulties facing several enterprises. For political rather than economic reasons, the new government elected in 1994 has abandoned this policy and has declared a preference for government-owned corporations though with an accompanying commitment to stronger management and greater efficiency.

The Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, supported by phosphate earnings from 1956 until 1979, provides funds to supplement the budget. From A\$68 million just before independence, it increased rapidly through the 1980s through a strategy of investing for capital growth (in part prompted by the restrictive terms of the financial settlement made with the United Kingdom at independence) and minimising drawings to support the recurrent budget. The value of the fund stood at A\$255 million early in 1992 and then grew steadily to exceed A\$350 million by the end of 1993. Reflecting

world share market trends, it dipped to A\$318 million in late in 1994 but recovered strongly to have a value of A\$360 million at June 1995 (Kiribati Government 1995d).

Constitutional structure

Since 1979, Kiribati has been an independent republic led by an elected President (*Beretitenti*) who is both Head of Government and Head of State. The House of Assembly (*Maneaba ni Maungatabu*) comprises 39 elected members from 23 constituencies, with at least one Member from each inhabited island, and is elected by universal adult (18 years) suffrage for a four-year term. The Attorney General is appointed by the President and, when not an elected Member of the Assembly, is a Member *ex officio*. The Rabi Island Council of Leaders may nominate one Member to represent the Banaban people now resident in Fiji.

Reflecting a concern that village, family and religious rivalries might produce a plethora of candidates and the election of Members with only limited community support, it is the intention of the constitution that all Members should have substantial support within their constituencies. Where candidates do not secure an absolute majority on the first ballot, a run-off election among leading candidates (two more candidates than the number of vacancies to be filled) is held. Ordinary Members (but not the President or Ministers) are subject to recall by their constituents through a petition signed by 50 per cent of registered voters. A successful petition would force a by-election.

The Members of the House of Assembly choose from among their number, by preferential ballot, three or four candidates to contest the presidential election. This provision was originally intended to ensure that, in a system without political parties, the voters would be offered a choice of candidates and platforms. The subsequent emergence of political coalitions and parties, however, has sometimes had the effect of offering the voters a choice among allies rather than a genuine choice of styles and policies. No individual may serve more than three terms as President. A President elected from a single-member constituency may be replaced in his/her Assembly role through by-election. The President and Members of the legislature are subject to the law, and liable to dismissal for criminal conviction and specified sentences.

It is the responsibility of the President to nominate Ministers from among the Members of the House. The President, Ministers and Cabinet are responsible to the legislature. The House appoints an independent Speaker from outside its own membership. All legislation is handled according to Westminster conventions with the proviso that, unless the President rules that a matter is urgent, all legislation is delayed during the Second Reading stage to allow Members to consult their constituents in *maneaba* discussions.

The presidential term, as for the legislature, is four years, though a President may be removed from office on either a formal vote of no confidence or by losing an Assembly vote on a declared confidence issue—an event that would bring a general election in its wake and, pending the election, would place power in the hands of the Council of State (Chairman of the Public Service Commission, Speaker, Chief Justice), not the President or Cabinet (Tetoa 1993; Brechfeld 1993).

The judicial structure comprises a High Court, headed by a Chief Justice, and Magistrate's Courts; there is also a Court of Appeal, and the right of appeal to the judicial committee of the Privy Council in London. The Chief Justice, who sits in the High Court, is appointed by the President after consultation with the Cabinet and Public Service Commission. Other High Court judges are appointed on the recommendation of the Chief Justice sitting with the Public Service Commission. The High Court can decide on any civil or criminal proceedings, including those referred or appealed from lower courts. Magistrates' Courts, which largely replaced Island Courts, usually sit with a panel of five Magistrates in land matters, and three Magistrates for civil and criminal matters. Courts headed by a Single Magistrate can hear criminal cases for offences carrying punishments to a maximum of five years imprisonment or a fine of A\$500 as well as civil cases. There are some 200 Magistrates in all but, at present, only one who may sit as a Single Magistrate. All decisions of Magistrates' Courts are subject to appeal to the High Court. The Court of Appeal comprises the Chief Justice, other High Court judges, and such other qualified persons considered necessary. Prosecution is usually handled by State Advocates; a public defender (people's lawyer) is provided at public expense.

The constitutional structure is thus strongly influenced by the Westminster tradition but has major features to reflect local circumstances and cultural preferences.

Local government structure

Local government is in the hands of Island Councils (one per island, or major division on larger islands where communication and distinct communities would make a single council unworkable). Councillors are elected on a ward basis by universal adult suffrage for a three-year term. The size of each council varies according to population distribution. Each council elects its own president. Councils raise rates on landholdings and also on a per capita basis, (the latter sometimes being differentiated by age and gender). Councils are expected to maintain local roads and public buildings including medical clinics and public schools. Police officers are posted to all islands but most councils also employ wardens (*kaubure*) to handle minor matters of public order and the organisation of minor community works performed through levies of materials and labour.

South Tarawa, the capital and major urban area of Kiribati, has a population (1995 est.) of 29,500. Here, urban councils have wider responsibilities than the Island Councils in some areas, with utilities being left to the central government. Local government comes within the portfolio of the Minister for Home Affairs and Rural Development though many officials posted to outer islands have responsibility to the central government as well as to the local Island Council. On many islands, especially in the southern Gilbert group, there is a close link between the formal Island Councils and informal community organisations, dominated by *unimane* councils.

Political process

Within Kiribati's modern élite, men heavily outnumber women, especially in senior positions of responsibility. A significant and steadily increasing section of this élite is engaged in entrepreneurial activity, often on the basis of capital accumulation from public service salaries. At the same time, on many islands, traditional élites—most clearly seen in *maneaba* councils—still have significant influence in the election of members of parliament and remain a powerful force in local government and administration. Community leaders retain, and seek to maintain, the ultimate control over the shape and direction of central government with an active role as critic and conscience of a central political system of which they remain fundamentally distrustful.

Traditional élites

While the strict, traditional *maneaba* protocols might be little used on a daily basis, the underlying values have remained and, in the northern and central islands, have been strengthened as chiefly power has declined. The power of the *unimane* remains a potent force in the political life of the outer islands in particular. After some early forays into national politics in the 1970s, village elders soon realised that, without a Western education, a facility in English, and experience of government, they could neither participate effectively in debate nor secure the advantages that a constituency expected from its representative. Parliamentary representation thus became the preserve of the younger, more educated men (only rarely women) who had the confidence of their elders. The old men retained sufficient influence on some smaller islands to secure the return unopposed of a given candidate, or the defeat of one who was seen to have failed in his community duty.

Unimane status implies not merely age, but age combined with appropriate behaviour, sound judgment, a knowledge of family and community history back into antiquity (necessary to the defence of land and other community rights), and demonstrated leadership within the family, village and wider community. Such power is seen most obviously in local government where, from within or outside the formal Island Council, the *unimane* might well control membership and set priorities. Councils that have failed to meet expectations have effectively been dismissed, though it might

appear on the surface as the mass resignation of a council or an unpopular faction; alternatively, the withdrawal of *unimane* support might simply lead to an inactive, dysfunctional council.

The traditional elite's fundamental suspicion of central government stems from the outer islands' heavy dependence on central government for funds and services, a dependence which is perceived as a restraint on island autonomy. To ameliorate this situation, traditional leaders seek to control the election of politicians, and to hold them accountable on an individual basis, even if they cannot control the decisions of the government itself.

Modern élites

The *I-Kiribati* modern élite is defined largely by its Western education which, in turn, has led to white-collar salaried positions and a lifestyle modelled on that of the now largely departed colonial élite. The lifestyle of this élite is characterised by residence on South Tarawa, high levels of consumption, ownership of motor vehicles, access to good educational and health services for their families, and the opportunity to travel beyond the country.

The élite so-defined is relatively small. In a Public Service of some 2,700, only 420 individuals earn salaries in excess of A\$9,000 a year. A similar proportion of the approximately 2,000 employed by government trading corporations probably receive salaries at this level, suggesting a total of about 700 in all. On first employment after qualifying, a graduate or a secondary school teacher can expect to earn A\$7,128, a primary teacher or a nurse A\$4,164. Half of all government salaried employees earn less than A\$5,000 a year (Kiribati Government 1995e). There are two lawyers in private practice, but no doctors or dentists. While a few substantial businesses are emerging, many of those nominally 'in business' (running stores or selling food, for example) have very small incomes (a few dollars a week) from this source. Apart from a few highly paid employees in private (mostly non-*I-Kiribati*-owned) businesses or in government corporations—where salaries of A\$17–20,000 are rumoured—only a handful of bus-owners and trading operators might match or exceed senior public sector salaries of A\$10–12,000. Increasingly, and in a departure from custom, salaried 'outer islanders' living on Tarawa have purchased land either for the erection of dwellings or for the establishment of small businesses run by members of their families.

While access to this élite is open in theory to all who have the ability, it has to a significant extent been self-perpetuating in that performance in the English language was for many years the most important criterion for entry to the country's major English medium schools (mostly on Tarawa). Entry to high school is by competitive examination, but the fact remains that the children of the postwar generation of *I-Kiribati* employed by government, the churches, and the phosphate industry have

enjoyed a significant advantage because of English-speaking parents passing their skills on to their children.

If local government remains the preserve of the traditional élite, national politicians are overwhelmingly drawn from the modern urban élite which depends heavily on the public sector. A majority of current Members of the House of Assembly are former senior public servants, some of them having also been business people. This continuing election of Members with a high level of expertise in the Westernised world of government and business reflects a realisation in the 1960s and early 1970s among the first generation of Gilbertese politicians, many of whom had only local government experience, that they were ill-equipped to handle the complexities of modern government. They struggled to cope with the machinations of expatriate colonial servants, found it difficult to secure advantages for their constituents and, having limited English, could neither follow proceedings in the legislature nor use parliamentary procedure to their own advantage. In the present House, there are only two or three Members who have difficulty in following a discussion in English and a similar number who can follow but not participate.

It is the national parliamentary process that provides the critical link between the élites. While kinship and village loyalties, and religion, are significant factors in determining voting patterns on outer islands, the old men remain a potent force in the process, especially when a run-off election is required and many 'village sons' have been eliminated in the first round. The candidates most likely to succeed will have been seen as high achievers in the national world of politics and government; they will have strong support from within their own families, probably belong to the majority religion on their home island, and they will have demonstrated a high standard of personal behaviour. Both significant changes of government in Kiribati—in 1978 on the eve of independence, and in 1994—owed more to the perceived failings and extravagances of Ministers and their supporters than to the effectiveness of their government or the popularity of their policies.

Urban dwellers and migrant workers

There is a further urbanised group, mostly to be found on South Tarawa, that falls between the modern élite and traditional outer islands society. This group is composed of those who have made a break with village life and have brought themselves within the cash economy to a significant extent. At one extreme are the dwindling number of relatively affluent workers in the phosphate industry and those in the merchant marine; at the other, the unemployed or those who are making a marginal living. They might live with relatives and contribute to extended family households through subsistence activity while seeking an unskilled job. Alternatively, they might live independently in squatter-settlements. In between come those in manual occupations in the public or private sector who may be wage workers or on continuing, but casual, terms.

This latter group has a significant political role. At one level, its members vote in urban elections in which, by definition, home island affiliation is of lesser importance. Moreover, urbanised *I-Kiribati* have become increasingly unionised and politicised. The urban-dwellers who are not among the élite are observers of affluent lifestyles, but are largely excluded from them. Combined with the modern élite, the collective voting strength of migrants (or the descendants of migrants) on South Tarawa is sufficient to return candidates who are not *kain Tarawa* (original land-owners of Tarawa) in general elections.

Given the predominance of public employment, these urban migrants are also in confrontation with the government at times. They suffer the deprivations and difficulties of living on the fringes of an urban society experiencing serious stress on services and where public health is demonstrably at risk. Both central and local governments seem powerless to control this urbanisation and its effects. The political cost of interfering with freedom of movement or introducing compulsory measures to control the urban population would be enormous. Urban dwellers are significantly under-represented in the formal electoral process (Kiribati Government 1995a).

At the same time, this group of urban workers and their dependents retain strong links to their home islands. They have an expectation that those who have secured positions of power and responsibility in government will use their influence to the advantage of their kinsfolk and those who share a home island affiliation, and may approach their home island Member rather than their urban electorate representative for redress of grievances. They are an important conduit of information on the behaviour and performance of public servants, national politicians and governments, and thus help to shape outer island perceptions of aspiring and serving politicians.

The nature of leadership

Traditionally, any action that raised the individual above others, or drew attention to individual achievement, was frowned upon. For example, canoe races (first organised by the colonial government) often produced unusual results with all informed observers recognising that the man with the fastest canoe was sailing skilfully, but slowly, so that he would not flaunt his prowess. The winner would know that he had been put in that position by canoe-masters who were better sailors and had better canoes than his. Reflecting this culturally-based reluctance to shine, it is often difficult to persuade individuals to accept positions of leadership or management, to question their elders, or criticise their subordinates. This attitude has become institutionalised over time and has many manifestations: for example, there is a tendency for a cohort entering the public service to advance more or less together.

Ideally, leadership should be exercised consensually and diplomatically. To some extent it has been accepted that cabinet ministers and senior public servants must exercise power, but it is the manner of its exercise that is critical to public acceptance:

there must be discussion before decisions are taken; leaders must be seen as expressing and giving substance to a community view. Leaders should be modest and self-deprecating. The use of political rhetoric is acceptable, even admired, so long as it is delivered in an appropriate manner and at an appropriate place. On the outer islands, it is still expected that male elders will speak on behalf of families; women or young men, even if well educated and professionally qualified to speak on an issue, will be hesitant to come forward, and may be criticised if they do.

This attitude towards leaders obviously creates difficulties for politicians. There is widespread acceptance that political leaders must be well-versed in the ways of government but there is an almost paradoxical insistence that they must also adhere to, and embody the principles of, *te katei ni Kiribati*—the *I-Kiribati* way. Quiet, consensual, diplomatic parliamentarians have generally been preferred to forceful debaters. One of the most important factors behind the success of Kiribati's first President, Ieremia Tabai who was only 29 at the time of independence, was that he was seen as embodying *I-Kiribati* values—taking his son fishing, cutting his own toddy, dressing modestly, visiting his own island and other outer islands and spending a great deal of his time in *maneaba* up and down the country discussing issues of concern to his constituents (van Trease 1993b).

In one important sense, Tabai's success as President moved public perceptions of leaders a further stage. Tabai's election represented a recognition that, despite relative youth, he could fulfil the traditional role of an older man. It also reinforced the perception that national politics was a place for those with appropriate modern skills rather than traditional qualifications. In the Cabinet selected in 1994, for example, ages ranged from 32 to 55, with a median of 45–6. With the Public Service retirement age set at 50, politics has been seen as an alternative, second career for some senior public servants. This pattern is typical of post-independence cabinets and reinforces the extent to which the *unimane* have stood aside and the political élite is seen as a group apart where personal qualities and experience takes precedence over the usual primary qualification of age.

There is also evidence, however, that public perceptions of political behaviour are changing and that the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate is gaining acceptance. Exchanges take place in the Assembly that would be unacceptable in a traditional *maneaba* setting. The House of Assembly is more confrontational than it was; indeed, some reports suggest that Teburoro Tito's strong leadership in the debates leading to the 1994 dissolution were a major factor in his subsequent election as President. As with Tabai, the election of Tito reflected the victory of a young, articulate leader over an older candidate (Teatao Teannaki) with less formal education. While Tito's forceful debating style had frequently been criticised in his early days in parliament, his advocacy on behalf of 'the people' against the alleged self-indulgence of 'the government' was reminiscent of Tabai's successful 1978 campaign. (It may also have

been significant that Tito's father, Tito Teburoro, had been a noted union leader in the phosphate industry in the early 1960s and, in the years before independence, had himself served as a Member of the House of Representatives where he had championed the cause of the outer islands.)

Because leadership was traditionally exercised by men, women seldom speak in public meetings and only three have ever been elected to parliament—one in an urban constituency where she had built a strong personal following for community work; one who replaced her deceased husband as Member; and the other because she was seen as a surrogate candidate for her husband who had been disqualified following a conviction for a minor case of electoral corruption where the court decision seemed out of step with local expectations of 'custom'. In 1991 and 1994, only four of more than 200 candidates were women, none of them winning significant support.

Politicians and people

The most fundamental principle of Kiribati elections is that politicians are elected as individuals on the basis of personal qualities and achievements rather than as representatives of any party, organisation, policy, class or ideology. While it is accepted that those in politics, the professions, business and the senior public service earn much more than the average family even, or especially, on South Tarawa, this in itself is not the cause of public criticism or concern. At a personal level, however, high income earners are censured if they consciously set themselves above prevailing community standards. Moreover, those earning high salaries are expected to be generous with their wealth. A degree of discrimination in favour of close kin, and even those who come from the same home island is not only acceptable, but expected, especially in such matters as casual employment, access to housing, places in schools or training programs. These attempts need not always be successful but it is important that the exertion of some effort is seen. There is a constant tension between the demands of the *I-Kiribati* cultural heritage and the expectations of a government and bureaucracy with Westernised values and controls.

It matters little whether ostentatious display is based on salary, business success, or a lottery win—extravagant behaviour is regarded as contrary to the expectations of *te katei ni Kiribati*. When that extravagance is believed to be the result of a bending of the rules, or the exploitation of government allowances for personal advantage, then public censure is swift. Such public perception has been an important factor in the fall of two governments and has brought several individual careers to an end.

As distinct from systems in which either traditional status or party affiliation may be the most important factors in determining an electoral outcome, the focus in Kiribati might be likened to a series of concentric circles extending outwards from the individual. The first criterion by which an aspiring politician will be considered is personal character which will include perceptions of personal ability, educational

achievement, employment record, performance of family obligations, drinking habits, marital fidelity, generosity towards others (especially in the exercise of employment or community functions), and role in the church irrespective of affiliation. Underpinning all, there must be perceived a strong commitment to consensual, responsive, representative leadership and to *I-Kiribati* values; the ideal candidate must be seen as 'a true Kiribati man'. Here, it must be emphasised that the entire population of Kiribati equates to the size of a modest town elsewhere, that individual communities are very small—mostly villages of no more than a few hundred people—and that there are few secrets.

Next in importance is family reputation, an important local factor because the candidate him/herself may well have lived out of the constituency with only occasional visits home since leaving for high school. Thus the family's traditional status, land holdings, level of contribution to community responsibilities and projects, involvement with the Island Council, *unimane* association, and church, and how its members have performed in the modern economic and political world will all be considered.

The problems posed by multiple electoral candidates from a single village are usually resolved by discussion and negotiation within the village, resulting in a single candidature with solid community support. Villages often enjoy strong kinship ties and, reflecting the pattern of conversion in the 19th century, will be dominated by either Catholic or Protestant affiliation. Religion is important, especially where there is a history of inter-denominational hostility, or where a candidate or party is seen to be sectarian in its approach to politics. In the 1991 elections, for example, the Catholic church campaigned actively for Catholic candidates partly because the Tabai government was seen as being dominated by southern Protestants, just as the pre-independence Ratieta government was seen as being dominated by northern Catholics.

While religion has been the focus of dissension and even violence in the past, and is often the subject of public debate, such analyses should not be pushed too far. For example: Tabai's Vice President and successor was a northern Catholic; Tabai himself in presidential elections regularly won many more votes than there were Protestants in some constituencies. In the 1991 presidential election, both leading candidates were Catholic without any noticeable drop in voter turnout on overwhelmingly Protestant islands (van Trease 1993d).

The *unimane* play the leading role in the evaluation of candidates. Politics and the evaluation of the performance of politicians is a continuous process and is an essential part of the regular community meetings as they are of the informal meetings of old men that take place daily in village *maneaba*. Politicians are expected to visit their constituencies regularly, to spend time in public *maneaba* discussion, and to make modest but appropriate gifts (most often tobacco and chewing gum)

to those who gather. There is little patience with those who 'work' the constituency only at election time.

In the lead-up to a general election, individual politicians are expected to define a policy at least to the extent that they will be expected to outline what they will do about issues of concern—the copra price, the state of local schools, the frequency of shipping, or the cost of living. Even though the names of likely contenders for the presidency will be known, their constituency election cannot be assured. There is, therefore, a tendency to shy away from discussion of the future presidency at this time though sitting members may well define their own position in relation to that of the past president or the actions of the outgoing government. It is, however, unusual to declare a 'national' position at this time and more common to concentrate on personal qualities and local issues.

Although issues like the proposed establishment of a Defence Force (1978) and the fishing agreement with the Soviet Union (1987) have polarised the electorate on occasions, it has generally been the style rather than the policies of a government that has determined its fate. During the Tabai presidency, the government's austerity policy was aimed at protecting the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and living within the country's means. While this approach was initially accepted as responsible, the government lost ground as living standards declined, and allegations of inefficiency, fraud and mismanagement in government activities attracted parliamentary criticism and public comment.

Again, the importance of Tabai's personal standing in the early years of independence must be emphasised. Without his presence, it became more difficult for the successor government of Teatao Teannaki to defend itself against the attacks of Roniti Teiwaki, Tewareka Tentoa and Teburoro Tito and their associates. These politicians not only criticised the behaviour of Ministers in the Teannaki government but, as part of the 1994 presidential campaign, offered attractive policies to increase the copra price through subsidisation and to abolish school fees for Forms 1–3. It should be noted, however, that it was unusual for such specific policy commitments to be made in the course of a presidential election; they were the more remarkable in that they were put forward by a new political grouping which captured all four nominations. The policies were therefore shared by all four candidates.

At an individual level, some candidates have moved beyond normal village commitments in making contributions to community fund-raising or offering gifts to key community leaders. As a consequence, several electoral petitions have been presented (though not all have reached court) but only in three relatively minor cases, have there been prosecutions and disqualifications for electoral bribery.

Most candidates prefer to build a reputation for generosity within normal community activities when all families are expected to contribute. On these occasions, those seeking to ingratiate themselves, or those who have offended the community in some way, often make a larger-than-normal gift which is recognised for what it is, but is acceptable within custom.

In presidential elections, policy and political affiliation to parties has assumed increasing importance. Given the constitutional provision which places the selection of presidential candidates in the hands of recently elected Members of Parliament, the ability of presidential candidates to win supporters is the key to nomination. In practice, the system places a great deal of pressure on, and power in the hands of, newly elected Members and helps to explain the rapid advancement that many make to cabinet office. At the same time, rapid promotion to Cabinet is defended on the grounds that the best people should be appointed and that most of the new Members are, in any case, well-versed in the ways of government.

Ideology in its Western sense plays little part in *I-Kiribati* politics. Accepted social and political norms are firmly rooted in an idealised corpus of beliefs and behaviours that are egalitarian and based on a clear set of individual rights and obligations within contexts of kinship obligations and community norms.

It is, however, an ideal that rests on residence within landowning (and occupying) extended family households within which leadership is exercised and obligations are met. In practice, however, urbanisation and the modernisation of government over the past half-century or more has created an anomalous sub-society that is urban-dwelling, removed from direct involvement with its own land and beyond the day-to-day control, if not influence, of its traditional leaders. However, urbanisation has seen the concurrent emergence of individual island associations on South Tarawa which provide a social focus and are not without political significance. Moreover, the members of the urban élite can more easily maintain their traditional links with their home islands because they can afford to do so, and can often do so at public expense in the course of their employment. On South Tarawa, the post-independence years have seen the emergence of politically-active trade unions which cut across family and island loyalties and can more easily do so because their adherents can vote in multi-member urban constituencies in which, except for local landowners, kinship has a diminished importance.

Governments and people

I-Kiribati approached independence seeing their central government as a direct successor of the colonial regime. Their basic suspicion was accentuated by the government's enthusiasm for a Defence Force that was seen as a strike-breaking unit in the guise of a paramilitary team with some responsibility for public works projects

on outer islands. It was during this period that, largely because of the approach taken by Opposition Leader Jeremia Tabai, the newly elected government was perceived as continuing in the colonial tradition rather than reflecting the country's newly-granted self government. At this time, there emerged a perceived dichotomy between 'government' and 'people' that has remained fundamental to *I-Kiribati* politics ever since.

At the Constitutional Convention in 1977, delegates were emphatic on the need for recall provisions, and for the desirability of a pause in the legislative process while Members consulted their constituents in *maneaba* discussions on all except the most urgent matters. It was also believed that this discussion phase would compel Members to keep in touch with outer island constituents and address their concerns. There has been only one serious attempt at recall (in the early 1980s) when a former union official who had been made Minister of Labour alienated his erstwhile members.

It has also been significant that, since independence and the removal of official, mostly expatriate, Members from the legislature, debate has been in the *I-Kiribati* language which gives all elected Members the opportunity to participate. Moreover, the broadcasting of parliamentary debates in a country with a single national radio station stimulates public interest and generates widespread understanding of political issues. Debates are broadcast live on FM on South Tarawa with daily highlights in the national news, and the full proceedings broadcast in stages each evening.

In the area of local government, the influence and workings of *unimane* councils provide a similar mechanism by which Island Councils are held accountable to local opinion.

Politicians and parties

The absence of a Westminster-style party system forces politicians to rely on personal qualities to secure election and then negotiate among themselves for the formation of governments. Without a party machine to 'deliver' a constituency to a chosen politician, there is a high turnover of Members; in both 1991 and 1994 elections, for example, 17 new Members were returned from 39 constituencies—some 44 per cent of the elected membership of the House (van Trease 1993c; Kiribati Government 1994a). Members know that the fickle mood of island politics can soon see allegiance shift to an alternative candidate. Longevity in *I-Kiribati* politics reflects continuing community confidence in a candidate. Even the High Chief of Abemama (possibly the country's largest individual landowner), was defeated because of a lacklustre performance and a perceived failure to represent his island's interests in the House.

In discussions with parliamentary candidates, island leaders will sometimes explore the possible relationship between a candidate and the known presidential contenders. It is more likely, however, that such discussion will be deferred until the general election is complete and the composition of the new House is known. It is possible that in some cases a declaration of allegiance for or against a presidential contender may affect a candidature or that community leaders may seek a declaration of this kind. For example, apart from his own career and parliamentary performance, two of the bases for Teburoro Tito's support are his father's close association with Tabai, and also his father's leadership of a labourers' strike at Ocean Island in 1961. Either could be decisive in securing strong support on some islands but could also arouse opposition on others.

Although parties remain the creations and creatures of the politicians, the major political groupings are all trying to canvas support on the outer islands and are recruiting advocates to their cause. There is a recognition among politicians that collective action is not only the path to political power but that, for stability, governments must sustain a majority on more than a day-to-day basis. No party has yet built a popular membership, and most do not have an independent life outside of the legislature and elections. At the same time, the Members themselves realise that the current constitutional review has prompted a significant groundswell of support for a constitutional amendment that would place the selection of presidential candidates directly back in the hands of voters through a two-phase election similar to that used in constituencies where no candidate receives a majority of the vote. On South Tarawa, as well as the outer islands, there is still a preference for the spirit of the *maneaba* that underpinned the independence constitution, a notion that there could and should be government by discussion and consensus. In some quarters, there is also a sense of outrage that known presidential candidates with strong support in some constituencies have been excluded from the presidential race by the machinations of politicians. There is a feeling in the electorate at large that it is 'the people' and not the politicians who should decide on the final three or four presidential candidates from as many of the elected Members as choose to offer themselves for selection.

Clearly, political parties will continue on their evolutionary path. Equally inevitable is the trend towards the definition of policy and commitment to specific undertakings at least, at the presidential level, as a means of bidding for electoral support. While there is continuing public interest in who is supporting or opposing the government, there is little evidence at present of public enthusiasm for parties as mass political organisations. And while the politicians might be keen to form parties once elected, and politicians seeking election might present themselves as belonging to one group or another, parties are reluctant to endorse candidates ahead of the general election because that would imply endorsing in advance only as many candidates as there were vacancies. Under the present system, and with the high turnover among

politicians, parties hesitate to declare candidates, though the allegiances of sitting members are well known. Rather, presidential candidates and their representatives are literally waiting for new Members in particular as soon as they reach the capital after the general election. It is at that point that allegiances become obvious, promises are made and broken, and coalitions formalised.

Parties and governments

No single group or political party has ever secured an absolute majority in a Kiribati general election. Rather, each government has been formed around a core group, usually described as a party, which has been one of three or four such coalitions which coexist alongside a group of independent members. The nomination of presidential candidates and the subsequent presidential election is critical because the constitutional separation of the presidential election from party strength in the Assembly means that any incoming President must face the possibility of a hostile Assembly. It is expected, and has been the case in practice, however, that presidents will be able to command majority parliamentary support, consolidated by a judicious balance in the allocation of portfolios. All are acutely aware that a vote of no confidence will result in a dissolution and another election and this in itself provides pressure for the formation of a working majority from the existing members. In 1994, Opposition Members in particular were at pains to explain to the electorate why they had forced an early election and emphasised that such a serious step had not been taken lightly.

In recent times, the consolidation of the House into 'government' and 'opposition' has further encouraged the formation of parties and coalitions and has also served to promote more negotiation and compromise among political leaders in the interests of securing and maintaining a majority. The greater expertise and experience of the National Progressive Party gained during the Tabai years was clearly evident in the 1991 election even in such relatively straightforward matters as success in encouraging electors to direct their votes towards its primary candidate rather than a 'local son' (van Trease 1993d). These compromise 'party' arrangements might be seen as subverting the intentions of the constitution but they may also engender greater political stability through the emergence of larger, compromise political parties and factions. In 1991, for example, both 'primary' candidates were northern Catholics though each had a southern Protestant as his secondary partner.

While the current high turnover of Members means that large numbers of new members must be quickly integrated into the process, it does raise the possibility that, in a system designed to encourage popular participation and to discourage party politics, there may soon be, in effect, a party-based system. The logical steps are, at first, for the solidification of parties or coalitions between the election of Members and the determination of presidential candidates and, as a second stage, a broader identification of candidates with parties by Assembly candidates prior to election.

Current practice, however, may well see two or more candidates within a constituency declaring support for, or opposition to, a national political leader as a way of establishing a political stance but this is not seen as incongruous. The electors' choice would still be primarily determined by the candidates' personal qualities and qualifications rather than by their declared affiliations in the national parliament.

As the situation stands, the negotiations that take place after the constituency results are known and before the presidential candidates have been chosen are all important. The assumption has been that any of the leading presidential candidates would, through his own group and with the support of either a coalition partner or a sufficient number of independents (that is, those who had secured his nomination in the first place) would be able to assemble a working majority of Members at least on confidence issues. The fact that there have been two governments defeated on confidence issues, and that one sitting President was victorious in the ensuing election and the other was not, suggests that a workable mechanism for a change of government exists following a vote of no confidence, or during a period of instability, as well as through a general election. It also means that the role of the President is decisive in forming a government and that governments, cabinets and parties are more easily led (and controlled) by presidents than presidents can be controlled by parties because of the loose party structure and the opportunities to woo supporters with the promise of portfolios.

The dependence of individual politicians on retaining the approbation of their electors, and the implications of bringing hardship to any kinsman or those from one's home island generates a hesitation about tackling contentious issues either at the policy level or as they affect individuals. This hesitation, together with the absence of any driving principle or ideology within government, limits the commitment of governments, collectively defined, to pursue any given course of action. Ministerial policies may be just that—individual preferences that have neither firm government support nor electoral endorsement. Presidential policies may languish unless they are enthusiastically embraced by Ministers who, at the same time, may find that such policies, or their own, may struggle in an environment where ministries are preoccupied with administering the status quo and have limited skills in the process of policy formulation and development.

Politicians, parties and policies

The absence of a formal party structure makes it difficult for a government to formulate and implement a consistent set of policies. Some parties have campaigned on the major issues already identified, but there is a more common tendency to 'sell' the qualities of the leader. While there may be a commitment to tackling such issues as outer islands development, the cost of living, the copra price, or the inefficiencies of government, there is neither personal nor party commitment to a clearly defined set of policies or even to a common ideological approach. The closest to the latter that Kiribati has seen

is probably the 'austerity' approach taken by the Tabai government but even this amounted to little more than restraint in use of earnings from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund and a reluctance to expand social spending; while there was some privatisation of government services, there was little enthusiasm for government restructuring, cutbacks in existing programs or increases in taxation.

In the 1980s, there were a number of issues that divided voters. There was always an undercurrent of religion with Catholic vs Protestant coincidentally reflecting North vs South, and once-hierarchical societies against the more egalitarian. It is again important to note, however, that Tabai, a Protestant, consistently attracted Catholic votes and that in 1991 both leading presidential candidates were northern Catholics who were strongly supported even in the Protestant South. Overall, Catholics outnumber Protestants by 53.5 to 39.3 per cent with the next largest following (Baha'i) having only 2.4 per cent (Kiribati Government 1993b). There are even smaller numbers of adherents of Seventh Day Adventism, the Church of God of North Carolina, and the Mormons. Other issues, even if transient in themselves, have contributed to the evolution of concepts of 'government' and 'opposition' (where styles of leadership have been an issue) and topical issues—the Defence Force, whether Tabai had completed the maximum three terms by 1987 or was eligible for a further term; the fishing agreement with the Soviet Union; and, in a more general sense, the policies, performance and accountability of governments.

While issues are becoming increasingly important in Kiribati politics, the linking of principles and policies to parties must be undertaken with caution. A study of the 1991 election in the constituencies of South Tarawa, the best educated and most sophisticated electorates, showed that several candidates (even some of those notionally in opposition) strongly supported outgoing President Tabai while criticising his government; almost one-quarter of all candidates had no party affiliation; and more candidates were associated with some of the parties than there were vacancies available. Apart from generally supporting or opposing the government, most candidates strongly emphasised their desire to serve the people ahead of their party affiliation or any particular policies. Perhaps it was as well, because at the end of the campaign nearly half of all voters surveyed on South Tarawa could not name the main parties currently represented in the House of Assembly (van Trease 1993e).

Such political parties as do exist might have rules collectively agreed by their politician-members but they have neither official lists of candidates, nor any administrative or organisational structure, nor even a mass membership. Any fund-raising is by donations of those directly involved and is used to cover only such minimal activities as photocopying small brochures. Although some personal gifts to cover expenses are made, candidates at all levels generally have to pay their own fares to visit other islands and to pay their own campaign costs. Because politicians tend to

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The concentration on personalities in Kiribati politics has not encouraged public debate on broad policy issues except, and only occasionally, in presidential elections. From observation of parliamentary proceedings over a period of more than twenty-five years, it is clear that there are strongly recurring themes in the questions asked of government or in motions sponsored by backbenchers. These are: the price of copra; the quality and availability of goods and stores on outer islands; the frequency of shipping; the supply of medicines and doctors for outer islands; the supply of teachers, equipment and maintenance funds for outer islands schools; and funds for outer islands development projects.

To some extent the prominence of these issues is inevitable, reflecting the geographic and economic realities of scattered islands and limited funds. But the constancy of the issues also suggests that neither colonial nor independent governments have yet been able to convince a significant proportion of the population of the implications of those realities. It also suggests that governments have so far failed to deal with the basic issues of cash incomes on, and government service to, outer islands to the satisfaction of those who live on them. The consequent, continuing dissatisfaction may also be reflected in the high turnover rate among politicians as successive generations are unable to either make significant progress on these issues or to convince the voters of the essential intractability of the problems.

While the period since the 1977 Constitutional Convention has seen a high level of public education on the constitution and political issues, there has been no parallel growth in understanding of the national economic structure and economic policy choices. While the politicians and the bureaucracy have become more aware of GNP, GDP, the nature of deficits in government spending, the balance of payments, and the management of the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund or the Freight Levy, such knowledge has hardly percolated beyond the politico-bureaucratic élite.

Constitutional issues

The constitution of Kiribati was designed with more attention to local circumstances than most. It was intended that the constitution would be reviewed from time to time, but few envisaged the comprehensive review that has been embarked upon by the current government. To some extent, the review has been prompted by Kiribati's political evolution, but it also owes something to a minor constitutional crisis prompted by difficulties between the government and the then Chief Justice in 1994. The main

politicians, parties hesitate to declare candidates, though the allegiances of sitting members are well known. Rather, presidential candidates and their representatives are literally waiting for new Members in particular as soon as they reach the capital after the general election. It is at that point that allegiances become obvious, promises are made and broken, and coalitions formalised.

Parties and governments

No single group or political party has ever secured an absolute majority in a Kiribati general election. Rather, each government has been formed around a core group, usually described as a party, which has been one of three or four such coalitions which coexist alongside a group of independent members. The nomination of presidential candidates and the subsequent presidential election is critical because the constitutional separation of the presidential election from party strength in the Assembly means that any incoming President must face the possibility of a hostile Assembly. It is expected, and has been the case in practice, however, that presidents will be able to command majority parliamentary support, consolidated by a judicious balance in the allocation of portfolios. All are acutely aware that a vote of no confidence will result in a dissolution and another election and this in itself provides pressure for the formation of a working majority from the existing members. In 1994, Opposition Members in particular were at pains to explain to the electorate why they had forced an early election and emphasised that such a serious step had not been taken lightly.

In recent times, the consolidation of the House into 'government' and 'opposition' has further encouraged the formation of parties and coalitions and has also served to promote more negotiation and compromise among political leaders in the interests of securing and maintaining a majority. The greater expertise and experience of the National Progressive Party gained during the Tabai years was clearly evident in the 1991 election even in such relatively straightforward matters as success in encouraging electors to direct their votes towards its primary candidate rather than a 'local son' (van Trease 1993d). These compromise 'party' arrangements might be seen as subverting the intentions of the constitution but they may also engender greater political stability through the emergence of larger, compromise political parties and factions. In 1991, for example, both 'primary' candidates were northern Catholics though each had a southern Protestant as his secondary partner.

While the current high turnover of Members means that large numbers of new members must be quickly integrated into the process, it does raise the possibility that, in a system designed to encourage popular participation and to discourage party politics, there may soon be, in effect, a party-based system. The logical steps are, at first, for the solidification of parties or coalitions between the election of Members and the determination of presidential candidates and, as a second stage, a broader identification of candidates with parties by Assembly candidates prior to election.

Current practice, however, may well see two or more candidates within a constituency declaring support for, or opposition to, a national political leader as a way of establishing a political stance but this is not seen as incongruous. The electors' choice would still be primarily determined by the candidates' personal qualities and qualifications rather than by their declared affiliations in the national parliament.

As the situation stands, the negotiations that take place after the constituency results are known and before the presidential candidates have been chosen are all important. The assumption has been that any of the leading presidential candidates would, through his own group and with the support of either a coalition partner or a sufficient number of independents (that is, those who had secured his nomination in the first place) would be able to assemble a working majority of Members at least on confidence issues. The fact that there have been two governments defeated on confidence issues, and that one sitting President was victorious in the ensuing election and the other was not, suggests that a workable mechanism for a change of government exists following a vote of no confidence, or during a period of instability, as well as through a general election. It also means that the role of the President is decisive in forming a government and that governments, cabinets and parties are more easily led (and controlled) by presidents than presidents can be controlled by parties because of the loose party structure and the opportunities to woo supporters with the promise of portfolios.

The dependence of individual politicians on retaining the approbation of their electors, and the implications of bringing hardship to any kinsman or those from one's home island generates a hesitation about tackling contentious issues either at the policy level or as they affect individuals. This hesitation, together with the absence of any driving principle or ideology within government, limits the commitment of governments, collectively defined, to pursue any given course of action. Ministerial policies may be just that—individual preferences that have neither firm government support nor electoral endorsement. Presidential policies may languish unless they are enthusiastically embraced by Ministers who, at the same time, may find that such policies, or their own, may struggle in an environment where ministries are preoccupied with administering the status quo and have limited skills in the process of policy formulation and development.

Politicians, parties and policies

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issues are reflective of current concerns and suggest, further, that the basic principles that governed the original constitution remain central to public perception. Indeed, the evidence suggests a public concern to reinforce those principles and, if anything, to maintain the control of 'the people' over 'the politicians'. The issues currently under debate include the manner of electing the President, the role of the Council of State, the rights of the Banabans, the interpretation of traditional gifts as electoral bribery and corruption, and the representation of South Tarawa.

If the constitutional convention is composed in similar fashion to that held in 1977, it will almost certainly be more conservative than the politicians and will place a strong emphasis on *I-Kiribati* values. It is intended that constitutional lawyers will be involved in formulating issues for the convention and in presenting issues to it.

Policies and public perceptions

The change of government in 1994 has marked an important transition in several ways. Given that the 1991 government of Teatao Teannaki was seen as a continuation of, as well as successor to, the Tabai government, it demonstrated that the Constitution could provide for dissolution and a peaceful change of government.

At least as important in the political evolution of Kiribati was the fact that the victorious 'party' made firm policy commitments. Underlying these promises was an alternative economic approach to that pursued by the Tabai-Teannaki governments. From 1978 to 1994, these governments followed a policy of austerity, taking the advice of the World Bank and other agencies that restraint on spending would provide the foundation for long-term growth. It may be debatable as to how far that advice is valid for an economy like that of Kiribati but, until its defeat, the government consistently adopted this approach, trying to keep annual recurrent expenditure within A\$35 million and drawing on income from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund only as a last resort. For its efforts, its 'fiscal responsibility' was endorsed by the World Bank and other international governments and agencies. After the departure of Tabai, the policy became more difficult to sustain electorally amid attacks on government performance, mismanagement, and financial difficulties in government trading enterprises, growing demands for increased expenditure on services, and complaints concerning the effects of inflation on outer islands producers. There was also some suggestion among aid donors that the government's own reluctance to spend demonstrated a lack of commitment—especially in the areas of health and education—and thus diminished the chances of securing aid. Total aid received dropped significantly in the early 1990s.

The Tito government has taken a different approach, arguing that the country can afford to increase spending which will alleviate real hardship and, at the same time, generate growth. This is the background to its decision to increase the price of copra, abolish school fees for Forms 1-3, and increase public service salaries by about 35 per

cent. The approach has been condemned as inflationary and fiscally irresponsible by Opposition politicians, but has won widespread public endorsement. It must be remembered, however, that such perceptions are developed within a context in which the implications of economic policies are judged very much in individual terms and with little reference to long-term national interests.

Apart from the innovation of firm policy commitments, which will enable the voters to make a much more precise judgment on the performance of the Tito government than has been possible for any of its predecessors, the 1994 presidential election also saw new elements in the style of campaigning. A significant innovation was the national distribution of a video-tape of a speech by the successful candidate in which he spelled out the charges of misuse of government funds and the reason for forcing a dissolution. This tape later became the subject of legal action for defamation by Teannaki. Tito's supporters also distributed a tape of the embattled former-President's defence of his position in what was generally regarded as an unconvincing and damaging performance. These developments suggest that national policy issues, firm policy statements, and consequential accountability may become more a part of the national political scene in the future.

The policy process

The decolonisation and post-independence years have seen the development and consolidation of protocols and structures that reaffirm the constitutional pre-eminence of ministers over public servants. The system is a scaled-down version of the British governmental tradition which has a history dating back more than three hundred years. It is worth remembering that Kiribati was independent within twelve years of the first election of (part-time) Members of its then House of Representatives, and that its own post-independence history that covers only sixteen years.

It is to be expected that the level of ministerial capacity varies, and that, as in any other bureaucracy, any lack of ministerial confidence, vigilance or strength will be used to strengthen the bureaucratic hand. Most policy formulation, however, involves third parties as well as politicians and their advisers. In particular, aid donors play a significant role in policy formation in some areas. Indeed, in areas on which they place a high priority, aid donors may almost carry the field. On the other hand, there is considerable *I-Kiribati* frustration over aid donors' reluctance to endorse projects which the Kiribati government considers to be important.

Policy formation in practice

An example may be instructive. The recent formation of policies relating to just one area of educational policy is illustrative of the complexity of the policymaking process in Kiribati. The example concerns a series of decisions made in 1994 and 1995 in respect of decisions to abolish school fees for Forms 1-3, establish junior secondary

schools, and upgrade the capacity of the Tarawa Teachers' College. All issues are linked, and illustrate the complexity of the overall process.

The decision to abolish school fees (mostly to cover food and accommodation paid by parents of students attending centrally located high schools) was fundamentally driven by political considerations. The fees weigh heavily on outer island residents where cash-earning opportunities are limited. The promise to abolish these fees was agreed by the Te Maneaban Te Mauri Party on the eve of the presidential election in 1994 and subscribed to by all four candidates. It was a policy designed as part of a wider package to improve living conditions on outer islands.

On assuming office, the government of President Tito also inherited a new education policy, drawn up in 1993 by international consultants. Among other things, the consultants recommended the creation of junior secondary schools teaching Forms 1–3 which, for selected pupils, would supersede Standards 7–9 in the existing primary system. The government had initially showed little interest in the consultants' report—partly because of its dense, jargon-ridden, and excessively detailed style; partly because of tension between the consultants and government representatives. In fact, it was substantially on the initiative of potential aid donors that some features of the proposed policy were salvaged and considered for implementation.

The Teannako government eventually decided to go ahead with four of the junior secondary schools on a trial basis, and the World Bank agreed to fund two schools, also on an experimental basis. The new Tito government accepted the notion of junior secondary schools but recognised that there would be differential access depending on a student's island of residence, and that this would carry a political as well as financial cost. The Minister himself was acutely aware of this issue, and it was on his initiative that the possibility of establishing more schools came under active consideration. If schools were established on all the major islands, as well as South Tarawa, he argued, overall educational standards would be raised. Moreover, the Tito government's commitment to abolish fees would, in effect, only be a cost until the schools were established, because children attending school on their home islands would not need to pay fees with a consequent saving to the government as the new schools were introduced. The new scheme would apply to government and church schools and further the broader aim of an integrated education system.

At the same time, the building of junior secondary schools would stimulate the economy, slow migration to South Tarawa by helping to make the outer islands more attractive, and create more Form 4 to 7 places in the secondary schools. In theory, the overall number of teachers would be about the same.

Ministry officials, who had embraced the original proposal only after some hesitation, were reluctantly persuaded to accept the Minister's revised policy. The

Ministry's task was made the more difficult by having a succession of four secretaries within the first year of the new government. In a separate but complementary development, the New Zealand government agreed to fund a project to strengthen, upgrade and improve the Tarawa Teachers' College. After an initial visit by the implementation team, however, the imperatives of the junior secondary schools proposal caused a re-orientation of the project strongly towards this end.

It is the Minister's intention that the whole scheme should be initiated from 1997 with a stated goal of launching at least the Form 1 program in something like 20 schools using 80 or more re-trained teachers in 1997. It will have to be implemented at a time when the primary system alone (government and private, including churches) is at least 140 teachers short on an establishment of about a thousand, and the education sector is constantly losing staff to other parts of the public sector because of the relatively low status according teachers, low morale because of a history of deferred maintenance and low capital input into schools, and salary scales that make administration an attractive option. The policy has, however, been firmly adopted by the government which is now seeking funds for the building of some 40 classrooms. It has been rumoured, however, that the World Bank, which was initially prepared to fund two schools, is alarmed at the escalation of the project and has considered withdrawing its support. Given the government's public commitment to the new policy, and its attitude to similar policy commitments, it may well use the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund for the building program if it meets donor resistance.

In summary, the issue of the junior secondary schools may well prove to be a classic example of a project that has the strong support of the Kiribati government and the people but, because of its multi-faceted nature, will require the cooperative support of several donors as well as the government of Kiribati if it is to succeed. To some extent, the policy has been formulated on an ad hoc basis according to changing conditions and priorities. The overall policy had not been clearly defined and costed at the time that the key decisions had to be taken. Procedural difficulties of this kind will make it difficult for donors to meet their own funding requirements or, at the very least, will cause major delays. Moreover, because of the way in which the policy is evolving, and the practical difficulties in the way of project implementation, the project may well be implemented haphazardly, depending on funding. Consequently, there is a good chance of frustration all round and a failure to achieve the anticipated educational improvement.

Above all, the example of the junior secondary schools shows that policy formation in Kiribati is not simply a matter for governments and ministers but must necessarily involve discussions with potential aid donors at every stage. Here, the bureaucratic requirements of the donors, which may well exceed the capacity of the Kiribati government, also represent a major delaying factor in implementation. Further, at each point that an outside party becomes involved, there is a tendency for local priorities to

be compromised, and for a little more 'ownership' of the policy, and commitment to it, to be lost. The case of junior secondary schools is by no means unique; similar difficulties have been characteristic of many privatisation initiatives, and also of outer island development policy and the building of outer island causeways under Australian aid.

Aid donors and policy formation

As in most governments, policies evolve in departments as part of the shifting relationship between ministers and advisers and, once approved in principle by Minister and Cabinet must then have approval of the Development Coordinating Committee (made up of all departmental secretaries) before going forward to Cabinet for approval. (A 1995 decision to replace the Development Coordinating Committee with a technical committee will probably change only the personnel and may do little to speed the process.) Even if a multiplicity of outside technical experts and aid donors have been involved (and partly because they have been involved) in the formulation of a policy, it may still take up to two years to reach the stage when a formal project proposal is ready for submission to an aid donor for approval, and a further year or two before that approval is obtained.

Once a proposal has been submitted to a potential donor, there may be further delay in obtaining formal consideration, often because of relatively minor matters of compliance. Subsequent negotiation and discussion, and the evaluation by the donor's consultants and technical advisers, might produce further changes which may make the proposal more cost-effective, environmentally sound, and fiscally responsible in the donor's eyes but, at the same time, may have the effect of further 'eroding' local ownership.

The introduction of formal conditionality at any stage of the process is not only resented but delays the process. There are several reasons for this. First, and most obvious, any significant change of conditions for the project must retrace the various stages in the approval process within the government of Kiribati. Second, there may be delays in reaching even the beginning of this reconsideration process. Inevitably and invariably, *I-Kiribati* ministers and public servants are supplicants in the aid process. This is not only demeaning in itself, but the negotiation of conditions (that is, changes to a locally approved proposal) also opens the possibility of having to back down, or to compromise on features that were of importance to those who developed the policy with local conditions in mind.

Under any conditions, this would be embarrassment enough, but there is a cultural element involved as well. Above all else, an *I-Kiribati* must seek to be independent in all things (hence the importance of owning land in a harsh atoll environment); even to ask for assistance implies a loss of face and creates a future obligation which undermines and qualifies independence. The 'shame' implied by having conditions imposed, or having to abandon an agreed policy, is considerable and is a reminder on the limits to

Kiribati's independence. Such embarrassments are best deferred as long as possible. Examples of formal conditionality being imposed by all major bilateral aid donors, as well as the ADB and the World Bank, were cited in interviews on more than one occasion. The resentment evoked by these examples is compounded by the frequency with which aid projects run over time or over budget, require substantial restructuring or redesign during the implementation process, or fail to meet the agreed objectives often, it is believed, through changes of policy or procedure, or deficiencies on the part of donors. There is also concern that in areas of current (fashionable) emphasis—like environmental protection or the status of women—there is a tendency for donors to introduce culturally insensitive or inappropriate concerns and conditions.

Within this context, the forward policy commitments of the present government are of interest because they will introduce through the policymaking process a degree of political accountability that has hitherto been absent. Already, it is clear that the current government takes these commitments very seriously, and is sharply aware of the high turnover of politicians and the level of collective responsibility that is implied. There is, however, an element of uncertainty in that almost all policy initiatives are likely to involve substantial expenditure which, in turn, implies a dependence on aid. On the one hand the electoral imperative may give to aid donors levers on project design and conditions that they have not enjoyed before because political imperatives and timetables may encourage acceptance of donor conditions. On the other hand, the government is as aware of the frustration inherent in the process as it is sensitive to the electorate which means that it may refuse to bow to external pressures and commit its own funds as a way of avoiding externally-imposed conditionality.

Future negotiation with aid donors therefore carries the possibility of greater conditionality but also the counterbalancing possibility that delays and inevitable frustration may lead the government of Kiribati to draw more heavily on the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund than it has done in the past in order to maintain its independence and the integrity of government policies.

Role of the Public Service

Historical influences

Kiribati has retained many administrative features developed during a long period of colonial rule. In particular, the colonial response to a small population, widely scattered islands, and a lack of commercial potential was to use government resources to provide not only social services, but basic infrastructure including transport and communications. The cost and inconvenience of decentralisation (seriously considered as an alternative after the Second World War) were rejected in favour of a centralised administration on South Tarawa. To these basic features must be added the realities that colonial policies were often driven by High Commissioners in Suva, then Honiara,



and that the colonial administration (expatriate and local) was strongly hierarchical and status-conscious—features which discouraged policy initiatives from below.

These basic conditions have left a powerful heritage in the form of a Public Service which explores and administers policy initiatives from above (ministers) and outside (aid donors) rather than developing alternatives from within; operates hierarchically rather than laterally; and, as by far the largest employer within Kiribati, is perceived as a source of safe employment, wealth distribution and, in effect, of welfare provision. Over the past decade, the size of the Public Service has increased at more than twice the rate of both the population and the national budget adjusted for inflation.

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Managerial capacity and managerial styles are not only bound by these constraints, but also by cultural mores which make it difficult for one individual to ask another to do something more than once, to check if an instruction has been carried out, or to criticise for deficiencies of performance. It follows that the government finds it difficult to provide service in more than a minimal way, and that government-owned 'commercial' activities have difficulty in defining strategic objectives, making profits, or providing the designated service. While senior officials have a clear perception of the ideals of an independent public service, the performance of these ideals, and efficiency generally, often falls short of them. Especially when dealing with the lower levels of the bureaucracy, an outside observer has a stronger sense of minimal compliance than of public service.

Employment in the Public Service

There are three basic entry points for the Public Service—at Level 11 (currently A\$7,128) for graduates or equivalent; Level 15 (A\$4,164) for nurses and primary teachers; and Level 19 (A\$2,552) for clerks, typists, police constables, drivers, and cleaners. This latter range may attract those who have completed Form 7 as well as those who have no secondary education at all. Most positions carry a salary range of two (and up to four) levels, with three or four increments (of A\$100–200) within each level. Public service employment, then, carries the possibility of slow but steady advancement within a pyramidal structure that has been steadily flattened by a policy of giving greater cost-of-living adjustments in percentage terms at the bottom than at the top. Conditions of service and discipline are matters for the Public Service Commission which, like the Audit Office, operates independently of the Public Service proper. Matters of appointment and promotion are the responsibility of the Public Service Division within the Office of the President.

In 1995, a process to produce job descriptions and job evaluations linked to salary scales and structures that reflect the nature of positions and the qualifications and experience needed for them was initiated by the Public Service Division. The tendency for the existing structure to produce 'promotion by cohort', especially in the administrative cadre, and the absence of bonuses or performance-based pay, effectively

undermines individual ambition which is already rendered tentative by cultural mores. It is evident, however, that some younger graduates with technical expertise (especially in the financial and management areas) are advancing rapidly through the senior levels but they are the exceptions in a service that provides few incentives or rewards for those who are good time-keepers, work hard, and are oriented towards public service. Individuals seldom seek out work and, more commonly, wait for specific tasks to be allocated. Indeed, those who out-perform their peers may be criticised for being 'shiny' and seeking individual aggrandisement—a criticism that now seems less frequently applied than it was to those who have been educated overseas and are expected to perform as members of the bureaucratic élite.

Performance and accountability

As well as the supervisory functions of the Public Service Commission and the Public Service Division, the Audit Office has the usual responsibility for public sector accountability. Despite its statutory independence, the Audit Office is often perceived as being a section of the Ministry of Finance and subject to the usual political controls and influence. The current President has emphasised the independence of the audit function and the necessity for a more modern form of audit that examines the accountability and efficiency of performance as well as checking on details of public expenditure. The Public Service system has no difficulty with suspending and charging those considered responsible for fraud or theft, but has no equivalent functioning mechanism (and little will) for dealing with those who are under-performing in their positions.

Like the government bureaucracy, the administration of the Public Service itself is centralised with departmental heads having little direct control over the appointment, deployment, promotion or transfer of their staff and, therefore, over the rewards and punishments of public service employment beyond being able to make recommendations as vacancies occur. Managerial attitudes towards timekeeping, absenteeism, application to duty and overall efficiency vary a great deal but it might be observed that overt signs of diligence seem to diminish in proportion to the distance, hierarchical or geographical, from the office of the minister or secretary.

These same difficulties apply to local government where councillors have little formal training in administration and lack technical expertise; their activities are constrained by informal community pressures; and many of the so-called island council staff have multiple reporting lines which make them largely responsible to ministries and agencies on South Tarawa. In addition, working for local government is generally seen as being of lower status than working for central government, and it is lower paid. While family pressures or individual preferences may retain some able employees on their home islands, other public servants generally have little enthusiasm for an outer island posting. In addition,

and as to be expected, communication is difficult; in-service training and supervision are more difficult to organise; performance and standards vary from island to island.

Policy processes

Within specific sections of the Public Service, the style, preoccupations and competence of individual ministers and, to some extent, of departmental secretaries, can have a significant effect. While some ministers deal only with immediate subordinates others bypass departmental secretaries to seek information or advice from those 'actually doing the work', a *modus operandi* that causes a degree of discomfort.

The public commitment of the present government to clearly-stated policies has not been lost on the Public Service which has taken some time to adjust to the presence of a new government with strong leadership and ministers who may be new but in most cases, as former public servants, are well versed in the operations of the Public Service. The extent to which the Public Service had become comfortable with a known set of policies and a general approach to economic policy emerged when a new government, determined to make its mark, introduced significant changes of both approach and specific policies in several areas. In general, however, the discomfort was accepted as legitimate and a degree of personal and professional adjustment was seen as an inevitable and proper part of the process. The right and responsibility of the new government to act as it did was not challenged within the Public Service.

With regard to the internal process, some ministers and former-ministers suggested that senior civil servants were overly status conscious in dealing with officials higher or lower in the pecking order than themselves. It was also suggested that they were reluctant to pick up the telephone or arrange a meeting to clarify details or clear obstructions. In general, the public service is excessively dependent on the use of memoranda which have to be laboriously drafted in English, and typed, before dispatch to their counterparts' pending trays, where they take second place to the primary business of the recipient department. A further delay may follow from the reluctance to communicate among ministries except according to rigid protocols of 'up, across and down' through departmental secretaries. Younger, well-qualified staff are often blocked by their seniors from 'cutting-through' and discouraged from showing initiative in a system where advancement has traditionally been incremental, rather than being based on performance.

The civil service is relatively small and personal preference, as well as the importance of Kiribati being represented and its dignity maintained at overseas meetings and seminars, means that the preparation of reports and papers for outside meetings and agencies will usually take priority over policy formation, implementation and evaluation. In addition, some senior officials noted that more than a quarter of their time was taken up directly or indirectly in dealing with the requests or requirements

of aid donors or meeting visiting officials—in addition to which they had to prepare for, or attend, regional or international meetings.

Government companies and corporations

In many respects, the commercial activities of government are seen as part of the wider Public Service and, from the 1970s, governments of Kiribati have grappled with the issue of the extent to which government should be involved in commerce (especially importing, exporting and retailing) and the provision of services like transport. The conventional wisdom, that the scale of operations was so small that either the services would not be viable or that monopolies would emerge, had historically led to significant government involvement.

Pre-independence devolution to government-owned statutory authorities was followed by corporatisation by post-independence governments as an intended first step towards privatisation. That final stage has been rejected by the present government which takes the view that governments can manage commercial activities at a profit. It has declared a willingness to undertake reorganisation, even to the point of dismissing boards of directors, but it has rejected policies for privatisation and organisational rationalisation that might lead to redundancies. It also retains policies of price control, profit control and freight equalisation as well as conditions of employment that mitigate against commercial efficiency.

Taken together, these structural factors and policies mitigate against the commercialisation of government activity, but the current financial difficulties faced by government commercial agencies (to the point of insolvency in some cases) suggest that there are also matters of managerial and technical competence that are of equal significance. There is a common pattern of a failure to establish clearly the strategic environment, set realistic goals, establish capital requirements, maintain equipment and inventory, monitor performance and manage adequately which all lead inexorably to serious financial difficulty. Even where difficulties have been identified by the Public Accounts Committee or the audit process (which implies a delay at least one year and often two years before problems are even recognised) successive governments have been unwilling to act. Directors are often appointed by virtue of an office or a connection to government rather than specific technical or managerial expertise. In some cases there may also be a conflict of interest in that the secretary of a department responsible for the provision of a service may sit on the board of the company providing that service. Directors generally lack commercial and managerial expertise and it is a common complaint of managers that directors lack a sense of 'ownership' in and commitment to the enterprise.

At the present time, government commercial activities are generally caught between their former role as agencies of government, with Public Service operating principles

and procedures, and a charter to provide services nationally and at lowest cost, and the current expectation that they can operate efficiently within the public sector and still make a profit, despite being bound by restraints on personnel policy and commercial practice. In an environment where public sector management is weak even under the most advantageous conditions, the basic goals have proved unreachable as is demonstrated by the indebtedness and managerial difficulties of several commercial entities. As well as the structural difficulties, and specific shortages of managerial expertise, the whole commercial sector presents an intractable political problem for governments. Reform carries with it the implication that employment levels, conditions of service, the price or availability of the designated service may be affected.

Conclusion

Public service reform, like a change in the practice of policymaking, is inextricably tied to more fundamental issues of political structure and process, and to underlying public attitudes towards the nature of government, the role of government in the provision of services and as an employer, and in the perceptions that 'the people' have of 'the government'. A significant factor in the defeat of the Teannaki government in 1994 was the widespread belief that its austere economic policies had become too 'hard' on the people, and that it had ceased to serve their interests. This suggests that, despite the changes in form and process that have occurred since independence, the basic principles remain unchanged as does the public perception of, and attitude towards, politicians and the political process. While the politico-bureaucrat élite might seem to live in a world far removed from that of the majority of the population, and wield power disproportionate to its numbers, there are significant mechanisms that maintain accountability. The same tensions that help to ensure that government in Kiribati remains responsive and accountable also create barriers to the formulation and maintenance of long-term policies, the reform of public sector management, and the privatisation of the economy.

These conclusions have major implications for aid donors and development advisers. They suggest that current approaches are inadequate because they are based on assumptions formulated outside the cultural and political context of Kiribati and take insufficient account of local conditions that make it difficult for *I-Kiribati* officials and ministers to formulate and implement policies that might have donor approval under current regimes. Kiribati has open, democratic government that, in traditional cultural terms, has strong safeguards and mechanisms to ensure that politicians remain accountable. But there are difficulties in applying the 'good government' criteria to economic policy and public sector management. An understanding of these apparent contradictions is crucial to the development process. The sense of frustration apparent

among aid donors, generated by the difficulties of sustained policy implementation and even project completion, is understandable but can be explained only partly in terms of the limited technical capacity of the Kiribati government to sustain major projects. As important, especially in the longer term, is the sense that 'ownership' of projects (and even, sometimes, of policies) has passed from *I-Kiribati* to donor interests and that the bureaucratic requirements of donors create significant barriers to implementation. A stronger donor presence in recipient countries, and a willingness to understand local conditions and values in the formulation of policy and the design of projects, seem logical starting points for more effective aid delivery.

Governance in Kiribati

Constitutional and government issues

Government by consent

Since independence in 1979, Kiribati has been governed under a constitution based on the findings of a widely representative Convention in 1977. The resulting constitution was a marriage of Westminster principles and local values and concerns. It includes, for example, significant measures to ensure the accountability of Members of the House of Assembly. Only candidates who achieve 50 per cent of the votes cast are declared elected on the first ballot; otherwise leading candidates proceed to a second ballot to ensure broad community support for those elected. The constitution also includes the power to recall a member on the petition of 50 per cent of registered electors. The president is popularly elected from three or four candidates selected by preferential ballot by the Members of the House of Assembly. This measure was included to ensure that the President would have both local and national support and not merely be representative of any single faction, region or religion.

Formal representation

The constitution provides for the representation of all inhabited islands in Kiribati, irrespective of population. Islands with populations of fewer than 2,000 people return one member; those with 2,000–4,000 return two members; and those with more than 4,000 return three members. At the 1994 election, nine electorates had fewer than 1,000 registered voters. There are 23 constituencies returning a total of 39 elected members. These constitutional provisions reflect the importance that *I-Kiribati* place on island identity. However, the maximum number of three members per constituency means that the urban electorates of South Tarawa now return only six members for some 37 per cent of the population. A recent proposal to increase the representation of the urban area was defeated, partly to ensure that the balance of political power remains

with the outer islands and partly because it is argued that migrants on South Tarawa are, to some extent, already represented by their home island politicians.

There is also a comprehensive local government structure for both urban areas and outer islands with elections held every three years. Traditionally, community leadership was vested in councils of old men; although informal, such councils still exist and wield considerable influence within the local government structure. They also have a role in the election of Members of the House of Assembly (Macdonald 1982:220–44, 267–74; Tetoa 1993; van Trease 1993a:6–15, Brechtefeld 1993).

Public participation

Within this structure, public interest and participation in the political process is high. The basic structure of the constitution is well understood. Evidence suggests that there has been a steady rise in the proportion of registered voters who have participated in general elections since independence, with turnout as high as 98 per cent in some constituencies in 1994 elections (Kiribati Government 1994a).

Politics is generally seen as men's business; there have been no more than three or four female candidates out of a total of more than 200 candidates in recent elections, although women appear to vote in similar proportions to men. Within the last decade there have been only two female members of the House, both of whom were seen as representing their husbands. In public meetings, male elders will usually speak on behalf of their families and women will only participate in debate if formally representing government or a community organisation.

The other significantly under-represented group in the Kiribati political system are those living in the urban area of South Tarawa which has some 15 per cent of the seats for 37 per cent of the population. Here, *kain Tarawa*—the original landowners of Tarawa—whose voting strength is heavily outnumbered by that of migrants, are doubly disadvantaged. Many outer-island migrants in Tarawa do not or cannot register because they have spent less than 12 months within the constituency when the rolls are prepared.

Accountability

There are a number of constitutional features which help to ensure the accountability of government—most obviously the four-yearly elections, the possibility of recall by petition, the provisions which make the President and ministers subject to the law, and the requirement that the defeat of a government on a confidence issue will ensure the dissolution of the House and a new general election (including a presidential election). The constitution does not assume the existence of parties and there is no official Opposition. These measures are intended to ensure that, when the President and Cabinet lose the confidence of parliament, the selection of a new government rests with the people, not the politicians. In addition, the Public Accounts Committee has a strong say in parliamentary matters and, by convention, is chaired by a backbench

(usually opposition) Member of the House. All government expenditure requires parliamentary approval and formal audit processes exist, even though they do not always work as efficiently as they might nor do they necessarily explore broader issues of accountability.

Predictability

The absence of political parties makes the construction of ministries a delicate business and means that governments are not always elected on the basis of clearly defined policies. However, the preservation of a parliamentary majority requires national, not merely regional support which is usually reflected in a broadly representative ministry. Predictability exists in such matters as the term of governments, the tenure of a President, and the frequency of elections. On two occasions since independence, a government's defeat on a confidence issue has been followed by a dissolution and general election.

Openness

The smallness of Kiribati's population (only about 80,500), and of its constituent communities, ensures that matters of government are both understood and subject to continuing public comment. Citizens are kept informed through a constitutional requirement that new legislation should be deferred for at least 25 days while it is subject to *maneaba* (meeting house) discussions and an expectation that members of the House will regularly visit their constituencies. Question time is a major feature of the House of Assembly and there are opportunities for both backbenchers and ministers to present their views. Kiribati does not have a television service and has a limited print media which is largely government controlled. Church organisations, and sometimes private (political) groups, issue newspapers on an occasional basis. The government publishes *Te Uekera*, a fortnightly newsletter in both English and *I-Kiribati*, which reports on politics, the activities of government and local sports, as well as regional and world affairs. Circulation is largely confined to South Tarawa. A more comprehensive news service is provided through national radio which fully broadcasts parliamentary debates and has local, regional and international news bulletins.

Overall, the government-owned local media is managed with a light hand in terms of content and emphasis. The current government, like its predecessor, has emphasised its desire for transparency, and has indicated that the news media should feel free to report on any matters; it has also indicated that this freedom carries a responsibility for even-handed reporting.

In accordance with this policy of transparency, the government participated fully in a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association seminar in August 1995 which involved all Members of the House of Assembly. Officials reported on the workings of government and, with an outside facilitator, discussed such matters as the separation

of powers and parliamentary procedure. The government also allowed its officials to discuss budgetary and other matters with all Members of the House and made full disclosure of relevant documents. Such participation is important in a system where there are no formal political parties and, therefore, few facilities for backbench politicians in terms of research and alternative policy development. There is wide access for all members of parliament to public servants, either to serve the interests of constituents or for the formulation of policy.

Constitutional review

In 1995, the government embarked on a major constitutional review through the medium of a Select Committee of non-ministerial members of the House of Assembly. A comprehensive series of public meetings was conducted in all constituencies. To some extent, this review was prompted by Kiribati's political evolution since independence, and the election of a new government, but it also had its origins in a 1994 crisis over the separation of powers and the role and responsibilities of the Chief Justice. The Committee's report will be considered by a full Constitutional Convention—replicating that of 1977—in 1996 or 1997. At present, only anecdotal evidence is available on the issues raised in public meetings but the process, as well as the public discussion, indicates the high level of interest in, and awareness of, constitutional issues. Discussions to date also suggest that community leaders are determined to ensure that the constitution remains in line with their original expectations and *I-Kiribati* values. The transparency and accountability of the system is well illustrated in discussions on a number of issues, including the Presidency, the Council of State, the Banaban issue, bribery and corruption, representation of South Tarawa and the Leader of the Opposition.

The Presidency. There is public concern that viable presidential candidates with strong community support have been eliminated from the ballot paper by the manipulations of factions and parties. This tends to confirm a widespread popular prejudice that political parties undermine the responsiveness of politicians to their constituents and some groups have sought a mechanism by which political parties can be banned entirely, or at least prevented from subverting the fundamental constitutional assumption that the people should retain as much power as possible. The most common scenario being discussed is that any elected Member should be free to stand for the presidential elections which should be run in two rounds of national voting in the same way as a constituency general election.

The Council of State. Because of the 1994 debates concerning the competence of the Chief Justice, and subsequent court action, there is considerable awareness of at least the major points at issue between the government and the Chief Justice, and between the government and opposition over the Chief Justice. Some meetings

have proposed that only an *I-Kiribati* Chief Justice should be a member of the Council of State which rules the country between a dissolution and the election of a new government. This reflects a growing concern that outsiders (whether judges or aid donors) should not be permitted to undermine *I-Kiribati* independence. There is also considerable support for a proposal that, upon the calling of a general election, the Council of State rather than the President and Ministers should govern the country.

The Banaban issue. The original intention of the constitution was to represent Banaban interests through the inclusion of a member to be nominated by the Rabi Island Council of Leaders. However, subsequent Banaba resettlement of Banaba itself means that the Banabans have, in effect, two seats. Given the long-standing *I-Kiribati* resentment over the original constitutional provisions for Banaban representation and the controversy over the distribution of phosphate revenues, there is some pressure for either the elimination of the Rabi Island Council representative or, more radically, for the effective striking of the entire Banaban clause from the constitution except to guarantee Banaban landownership and to provide for a representative of those actually resident on Banaba.

Bribery and corruption. There has never been any serious suggestions of electoral impropriety or manipulation of election results, although a small number of electoral petitions for bribery and corruption are presented after each election. Politicians from all sides want a clear definition of what is legally acceptable electoral practice (preferably in accordance with custom).

Representation of South Tarawa. As mentioned before, South Tarawa is significantly under-represented in the electoral system. To bring South Tarawa into line in terms of population would mean the creation of an additional eight or nine seats. However, the general perception is that South Tarawa is adequately represented by its current Members and through the services of outer island Members.

Leader of the Opposition. The issue of the status of the Opposition has also been raised. Some advocate the formalisation of the *de facto* situation to the extent of formally establishing the position of Leader of the Opposition.

The constitution of Kiribati is a workable compromise between local values and standard constitutional forms. The current review was not prompted by any significant level of discontent; rather, a belief that a review would be timely and that the government should provide an opportunity for public discussion. Public participation in the present constitutional review is taken for granted by both government and the populace. It would only be at considerable political risk that the government would consider amending the constitution without public consultation or acting contrary to the stated wishes of a constitutional convention.

Human Rights

Basic human rights have been protected in Kiribati since the introduction of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony Constitution of 1967. The Kiribati independence Constitution includes a standard set of human rights protections. Freedom from discrimination on the grounds of race and religion are guaranteed, though women's rights are not specifically protected.

Women's rights

Women participate in the business of the *maneaba* (particularly in the preparation and distribution of food) though they do not generally speak on public occasions. Generally, they defer to the elder males of their families and inherit less land than men. It has been alleged that the customary lower status accorded to women has also affected their promotion within the Public Service except in those 'supporting' occupations (for example, nursing) which are seen as the traditional preserve of women (Ngaebi et al. 1993). Women are significantly under-represented in the upper levels.

There is also a question as to how far female performance in employment is linked to broader cultural and educational issues. It has frequently been observed, for example, that while female students perform better than males at the point of entry to high school, they generally lag behind by the time that they leave—a trend that has been reflected in the awarding of more overseas scholarships to males than to females. Female completion rates are also lower with some having withdrawn from school for child-rearing or other domestic responsibilities. At present, males outnumber females by a proportion of three to one in the award of overseas scholarships and in formal salaried employment. It can therefore be suggested that, compared with men, fewer qualified women enter the Public Service at critical points and that this is perpetuated in subsequent promotion and training.

Freedom of speech, media and association

Freedom of speech and association are protected by the Constitution and respected in practice. Indeed, the public broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings where confrontational styles may be more acceptable than they are in the traditional *maneaba* has encouraged freedom of speech beyond traditional limits. Diseconomies of scale make the further development of a mass media a remote possibility.

Universal education

I-Kiribati society is overwhelmingly literate because of a long history of mission and, more recently, government, education. All children receive free primary education to Standard 9 with fewer than one-third of children being selected for transfer to central secondary schools after Standard 6; these selected students then proceed through Forms 1–7 of the secondary curriculum. Under a new policy to be introduced in 1997, all students will be offered the opportunity of Forms 1–3 (replacing Standards 7–9) at

new junior secondary schools. The 1990 census showed that 94 per cent of persons over the age of ten have attended school, and that some 20 per cent of the population has at least some secondary education (Kiribati Government 1993c).

Freedom of movement

There is no restraint on the movement of population within the Republic of Kiribati although there used to be a system of permits controlling inter-island migration during the colonial period. The issue is again the subject of muted public debate because of the continuing increase in the population of South Tarawa—currently growing at some 3.3 per cent per annum. The growth of South Tarawa's population is of continuing concern to those responsible for urban planning and public health. Any formal restriction on movement has been ruled out by politicians and public sentiment, leaving the government to consider ways of making residence on the outer islands more attractive than it is, or of developing plans for a major upgrading of services on South Tarawa. This is in part the reasoning behind policies for improving educational opportunities, services and facilities on outer islands (Kiribati Government 1995a).

Legal issues

Kiribati has a clearly defined judicial hierarchy rising from Magistrates' Courts, through the High Court to a local Court of Appeal, with the possibility of further appeal to the Privy Council. The Chief Justice heads the judicial system and also fulfils important constitutional functions. This system is based largely on a legal and judicial structure that was firmly established during the colonial period. It is widely understood and, with the recent presence of a small number of *I-Kiribati* lawyers in private practice, the number of civil cases has increased significantly. As well as State Advocates who handle prosecutions, there is a People's Lawyer who can act for defendants as well as offer independent advice in other legal matters. The major criticism that is levelled at the system is the propensity for delay in cases of remand and of appeals—charges that reflect problems arising from geographical fragmentation as well as the difficulty in attracting and retaining senior judicial officials. Additional difficulties have been caused in 1994–95 by disputes between a former Chief Justice and the government, and subsequent delays in obtaining a replacement Chief Justice and Judge for the High Court.

The rule of law

The principle of the rule of law was firmly established during the colonial period and the coercive role of the police, the Audit Office and other government officials is accepted. While the police might sometimes seem less than vigilant in their enforcement of minor laws, allegations of police corruption are rare. There are sometimes complaints, especially with reference to Magistrates' Court, that the law applied is inconsistent—

a charge which seems to have some foundation in the delay in the preparation and publication of a consolidated collection of laws and in the lack of training provided for magistrates on outer islands. The recent appointment of a training officer for magistrates is intended to address this. There is no evidence to date of serious corruption among politicians or officials.

The judiciary

The smallness of the judiciary and the fragmented nature of the country mean that the judicial procedure will always operate under difficult conditions. However, these difficulties which are inherent in the system were exacerbated in 1993–94 when delays in the system aroused serious public complaint. It was alleged in the House that some 700 cases from 1990–94 were pending, largely because of the reluctance of the Chief Justice to go on circuit to outlying islands and his tendency to refer cases back to lower courts rather than to decide appeals. This, and other matters concerning the Chief Justice became a matter of serious dispute and provoked a major division within the House as to the procedures under which the matter should be handled. It was also alleged that the Chief Justice was, in effect, interfering in the political process. The aftermath of this affair has resulted in further delays within the judicial system.

Protection of contract

The law provides for the protection of contract through civil action. While there are few contracts involving private individuals and small businesses because of the nature of the economy, the appropriate legal provisions do apply. The government is subject to the law in this, as in other matters.

Protection of property rights

The law provides for the protection of property and most public attention is focused on the protection of landholdings. Land in Kiribati is divided into plots which are mostly individually named and owned. Matters of dispute over lands were comprehensively investigated in the 1940s and 1950s leading to a so-called final land settlement. The colonial government consistently held that disputes with this settlement could not be reopened by virtue of legislation passed at that time. Post-independence governments have taken a similar view on the basis of legal advice that the previous lands settlement was final. However, recent discussion on the rights and legislative powers of Parliament have brought a realisation that the matter is not necessarily closed for all time and that the matter could be reopened by legislation.

Disputes over landownership and inheritance are frequent and these may be settled informally within families, or by informal community discussion without reaching court. Many, however, end up within the legal system where they are heard in Magistrates' Courts. Cases are resolved in accordance with legal principles and take account of customary usage and transfers. The government and island councils have

the power to take land for public purposes. Within the urban area such land may also be re-leased for housing in which case the use of the land becomes subject to the consent of the registered owner as well as to the leasing authority. It has been alleged that such agreements are increasingly subject to under-the-counter payments demanded by landowners as a condition of their consent.

Public sector management

Independence of the Public Service

The principle of an independent bureaucracy that serves successive governments in the provision of policy advice, administration of policy, implementation of legislation, and meeting of statutory obligations, is upheld within the Public Service. There were no politically motivated sackings or appointments following the change of government in 1994, and the independent role of the Public Service Commission and the Public Service Division of the President's Office was recognised. The role of ministers in formulating policy and their constitutional responsibility for the activities of their departments is well established.

Skill levels of the Public Service

The Public Service is heavily dependent on that small minority of *I-Kiribati* who have the opportunity for advanced secondary education. Despite being larger than is necessary, the Public Service is still very small in absolute terms and is heavily dependent on the technical and managerial expertise of a small group of senior managers with tertiary or professional training. The concept of service is not well ingrained and affects overall efficiency; cultural restraints also make it difficult for managers to raise the levels of competence. In addition, the Public Service pay-scale presents few incentives for advancement or promotion. A culturally-based unwillingness to shine imposes a further barrier to improving efficiency and performance. The greatest skill deficiency within the Public Service is at the managerial level in general and, at all levels, there is a serious under-supply of officials with financial competence. Staffing and resourcing difficulties faced by the Tarawa Technical Institute in recent years have added to the difficulties of recruiting staff with appropriate technical skills (Kiribati Government 1993a).

Policy formation and implementation

It follows that there is difficulty within the Public Service in formulating and implementing policy. At the political level, governments have not always had an electoral commitment to broad strategies and often the support given to an individual policy depends on ministerial enthusiasm and competence. Moreover, ministerial and official initiatives are complicated by the heavy dependence of Kiribati on overseas aid and the consequential involvement of aid donors in the policy formation process. There is often difficulty and delay in formulating policy which has the support of the

Kiribati government as well as meeting the funding criteria of the aid donors. In addition, the absence of a party system makes it difficult to sustain major long-term policies.

To take an obvious example, the urban area of South Tarawa is a source of major concern in such areas of urban planning and public health (Kiribati Government 1995a). Yet, because any direct government involvement in major relocation of services or restrictions on settlement may be seen as an attack on the rights of residents, and may be seen as inhibiting the migration process, governments are reluctant to tackle the underlying issues. Moreover, the government is so small that it lacks the technical expertise to undertake such a task unaided. The inevitable participation of aid donors, while assisting in the policy formation process, would also have the effect of undermining the independence of the Kiribati government. The agendas of the aid donors in such areas as women's rights and the environment may be seen as compromising the preferences and independence of the Kiribati government. Policy formulation would also be complicated by the sector preferences of the various aid donors, and the preferred balance between capital and recurrent funding. Similar complications exist for policy formation in other areas—for example outer islands development, or education policy.

Accountability and audit

While occasional cases of fraud and misappropriation are identified and prosecuted, there is little evidence of significant corruption within the Kiribati public sector. However, the low level of competence in financial matters means that funds are often mislaid or misdirected. The audit process itself is compromised by the level of expertise within the Audit Office and by a preoccupation with petty accounting procedures. The present government has re-emphasised the independence of the Audit Office and has indicated that audit responsibilities should be widened beyond Public Service departments to include government corporations and commercial activities and broadened to include functional responsibilities as well as fiscal probity.

Technology

Communication within the government is generally inefficient. The lack of an integrated policy within this area is a significant barrier to increased efficiency within the Public Service. The provision of a comprehensive telephone system on South Tarawa has had a major effect on convenience and efficiency within the Public Service, although there is still, perhaps, an unnecessary level of dependence on written communication. The gradual introduction of computers has made an impact in recent years. Photocopiers are readily available. However, servicing facilities are often inadequate

and there is a chronic shortage of spare parts. At the same time, the generally low-tech nature of *I-Kiribati* society and the shortage of funds for new technology in high schools means that skill levels in this area are not extensive within the community. All of these factors means that there is a significant shortage of appropriate technology either at the training level or within the Public Service: there is little point in advancing the technology when the appropriate skills and servicing facilities have yet to be developed.

Resource acquisition and allocation

Government revenue

Government revenue for 1995 was projected at A\$38 million with some 47 per cent of this amount being derived from international fishing licences. The next largest source of revenue (17 per cent) was from import duties and a further 20 per cent was to be drawn down from the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund. This latter fund of some A\$360 million represents the invested value of phosphate revenue in the years before independence. The balance of government expenditure was to be covered by interest, dividends from government trading activities, the hotel tax and (for some 20 per cent of the total expenditure of A\$47 million) a current surplus in the consolidated fund. In addition to recurrent expenditure, overseas development assistance of A\$29 million was projected (Fairbairn 1992; Kiribati Government 1995b).

Allocation and decision-making

The parliamentary process ensures public debate and scrutiny of government financial allocations. Broadcasting of debates and the activities of the Public Accounts Committee ensures scrutiny within and beyond the parliamentary process. However, it is rather more difficult to ensure that projects are carried out according to specifications and timetables, and that appropriate accountabilities exist within departments.

Project consultation

As has been indicated there are difficulties in the formulation and implementation of government policies. Generally, consultation takes place between aid donors and the upper echelons of the Kiribati government, but not always within the departments or with those groups which would be affected. Although all government legislation is subject to delay for public discussion, there is no equivalent process for aid projects. The dominance of aid donors in the development process and their significant participation in policy formation means that ownership of policies and projects may

well shift from *I-Kiribati* beneficiaries to aid donors and project managers. The scale of government activity, and the powerful influence of aid donors, can result in projects which proceed virtually independently of government or people.

Private sector development

The combination of the smallness and remoteness of Kiribati, its geographical fragmentation, and its colonial heritage mean that government is dominant in the economy and in employment (Kiribati Government 1993b). While there has been some devolution of government commercial responsibility to trading entities, these are still bound by government policies, cultural restraints and technical and managerial deficiencies which undermine their performance. Cultural considerations, as well as government policies, have traditionally inhibited and, some would argue, have been hostile to, private sector commercial development. A change is evident in some areas—most notably public transport—but there are few entrepreneurs with the savings, assets or skills to develop new industries. While there are many barriers to successful commercial development through the private sector, there is potential for the privatisation of many government services. Government policy and public preference leave such activities within the public sector at present despite strongly worded advice from aid donors favouring restructuring and privatisation. The government's stated preference for more efficient state-owned corporations, rather than for privatisation, is defended on the grounds of scale and scarcity of resources, and has the strong support of labour unions.

Corporatism and institutional pluralism

There has long been a strong interest in community organisations. Within communities, these include island associations which are generally dominated by the informal *unimane* councils, both on the outer islands and representing those outer islands on South Tarawa. Equally strong have been the churches which run a range of welfare and women's organisations as well as having a significant role in the provision of education. Women's committees have long had a role in such areas as the provision of maternal and child health services and in the cooperative manufacture and marketing of handicrafts. Since the 1920s, there has been participation in trade unions, most notably in the phosphate industry until its termination in the late 1970s. On Tarawa in particular, Public Service and teacher organisations and trade unions have played a role for the past 20 years with occasional confrontations between government and unions. Since the 1930s, the cooperative movement for the collective marketing of copra, the importation of goods and local retailing has had a significant role in the economy. Cooperative societies, such as churches and island associations provide a strong framework for collective economic activity which, in accordance with *I-Kiribati* values, allows for innovation and profit on a community rather than individual basis. While the presence of such organisations in no way challenges the dominance of the

government, they nonetheless provide a framework within which the government must operate and provide a check on government policies and activities. The Kiribati Trade Union Congress has some 5,000 members spread across 18 affiliated unions, the largest of them being the Kiribati and Tuvalu Overseas Seamen's Union with 2,000 members. The General Workers Union and the Public Service Union each have about 400 members.

Military spending

In accordance with its constitution, Kiribati has no military or defence forces though, under a defence partnership agreement with Australia, it maintains a fisheries patrol vessel to monitor activities within its Exclusive Economic Zone. The coercive capacity of government is therefore limited to the moral authority that flows from government by consent and an unarmed permanent police force of 262 officers.

Conclusion

This brief commentary has shown Kiribati as a nation that is highly literate, has a guarantee of basic human rights, and a political process that provides for a high level of formal representation and informal participation. These conclusions are supported by a recent Freedom House survey that placed Kiribati as one of very few countries to score a '1' rating for both political rights and civil liberties. On the other hand, women are significantly under-represented in political life and employment and, while not subject to formal discrimination, are restrained by traditional cultural norms. Kiribati has appropriate political, legal and local government structures and an independent public service. From a governance perspective, the principal concerns would have to be with efficiency and performance, rather than political structures. Attention would have to be directed to deficiencies in managerial and financial skills within the bureaucracy; the level of aid-dependence; the lack of productive economic activity; the dominance of the government within the economy; and the poor performance of government-owned corporations and trading enterprises.

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