

## Political Reviews

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*The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2020*

NIC MACLELLAN

*Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2020*

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## BOUGAINVILLE

As in other parts of the world, politics and public life in Bougainville in 2020 were overshadowed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In alignment with the course taken by the government of Papua New Guinea (GoPNG), the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) declared a pandemic-related state of emergency in Bougainville on 23 March 2020 (ABG 2020a). Although Bougainville reported only two cases of COVID-19 the whole year, the state of emergency, including corresponding restrictions on travel and public life, was extended several times and remained in place until the end of 2020. This affected political developments considerably. Elections for the Bougainville House of Representatives and the Bougainville president had to be postponed from May to August and September 2020, and consultations between the ABG and GoPNG on the implementation of the results of the referendum on the future political status of Bougainville, which in December 2019 had resulted in a 97.7 percent vote for independence (Boege 2020), only made very slow progress.

The state of emergency initially included a ban on all flights and ships coming to Bougainville, closure of the border to Solomon Islands, stay-at-home orders for the general public and nonessential staff of the Bougainville Public Service, restrictions on travel within the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARoB),

closure of schools and markets, and bans on public gatherings, including sports, musical and other cultural events, and church services (ABG 2020a). In the weeks following the emergency declaration, an Emergency Response Plan was elaborated, and an Emergency Response Team, several government committees, and a House of Representatives Emergency Committee were established. Public awareness initiatives were undertaken; hospitals in Buka, Arawa, and Buin made preparations; and an isolation facility, funded by the Australian government, was built. Activities were coordinated by a Joint Taskforce Agency and the Emergency Response Team. Officials, however, constantly complained about widespread and increasing violations of the emergency regulations (of which there were as many as twenty-nine): people crossing the Solomon Islands border by boat, open roadside markets and shops, overloading of public motor vehicles (the main means of transport in Bougainville), people coming together in large groups, and so on. There was an obvious discrepancy between the emergency regulations as laid down in writing and the reality on the ground. It is almost impossible to impose emergency restrictions in an environment like Bougainville. Over the course of the year, restrictions were gradually loosened, although the state of emergency remained in place. The harshest restrictions applied to travel into and out of the region. This

proved to be appropriate: the only two COVID-19 cases in Bougainville were a student who had come back home from Port Moresby at the end of July and a Bougainville mine worker from the Lihir mine in Papua New Guinea (PNG) who had traveled back for family holidays in November (RNZ 2020a; New Dawn 2020e).

The COVID-19 pandemic had serious political effects. Consultations between the GoPNG and the ABG about the implementation of the referendum result of December 2019 could not proceed as planned. On 12 March 2020, immediately before the emergency declarations in PNG and the ARoB, a meeting of the Joint Supervisory Body (JSB), the high-level GoPNG-ABG institution responsible for the Bougainville peace and referendum process, had agreed on an ambitious agenda for the referendum consultations. It resolved that the “Post Referendum joint consultation process commence soon after the ABG 2020 elections” and that a “Post Referendum Inter-Government Consultation Process Framework,” as well as several joint bodies, be set up for the process. Furthermore, it addressed funding commitments made by the GoPNG, acknowledged the successful completion of the Bougainville Weapons Disposal process, and resolved “to transfer all remaining powers and functions as provided in the BPA [Bougainville Peace Agreement] to the ABG” (ABG 2020c). Both sides were in agreement that it would only make sense to have substantial consultations after the establishment of a new ABG, with elections originally planned for May 2020. With the COVID-19 crisis, however, it became clear that elections

would have to be postponed; hence, the post-referendum transition process that had begun after the December 2019 referendum lost momentum.

The last ABG elections were held in June 2015, and according to the Bougainville constitution, elections are due every five years. For the postponement of the elections to be constitutional, the Bougainville State of Emergency Act of 2006 had to be changed. This happened on 21 April. The House of Representatives voted on amendments to the act that make it possible to extend its term, as well as those of the Speaker of Parliament and the Bougainville president, during a state of emergency. A day later, the House made use of these new regulations and extended terms (ABG 2020b). As a consequence, the Bougainville Electoral Commission decided to prepare for elections in the second half of August.

Election preparations under the state of emergency were difficult. Indeed, they had been complicated even before the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis because of attempts by the ABG to amend the constitution on two points. The first proposed amendment would maintain the three reserved seats in Parliament for ex-combatants (according to the Bougainville constitution, these seats were to exist only until the referendum). The second would allow a president to run for a third term. The Bougainville constitution stipulates a two-term limit for the position of president, but President John Momis was intent on remaining in power; he and his supporters argued that he was the best man for the job during the critical transition stage. Public consultations

about the proposed amendments showed clear support for the continuation of the ex-combatants' seats—and clear rejection of a third term for the president. The decision on the amendments had to be made by the House, with a two-thirds majority needed for changes to the constitution. While the House voted in favor of maintaining the three ex-combatants' seats, it rejected a third term for the office of president (*New Dawn* 2020b). Momis, however, did not give up, and he took the case to the PNG courts, arguing that his human rights had been violated by his being prevented from standing again (*New Dawn* 2020a). He failed once more, with a final ruling of the PNG Supreme Court on the matter on 30 May confirming the Bougainville Parliament's majority vote "not to change the Constitution to allow presidents to hold the role for a third term" (RNZ 2020b).

At the end of May, the Bougainville Electoral Commission announced that elections would take place from 12 August to 1 September, despite the COVID-19 state of emergency. The election writs were issued on 17 June. A total of 440 candidates contested for 40 seats, including the president's seat; 33 constituency seats; 3 reserved women's regional seats (for north, central, and south); and 3 regional ex-combatants' seats. This was the biggest number of candidates ever, reflecting the particular importance of these elections: Bougainvilleans expect that the new government will lead Bougainville into independence. There was a record number of twenty-five candidates for the presidential seat. Among them were two women (Ruby Mirinka and Magdalene Toroansi),

several former high-ranking leaders of the secessionist movement (James Tanis, Ishmael Toroama, Sam Kauona, Andrew Miriki, Martin Miriori, Nick Peniai, and Reuben Siara), former members of the National PNG Parliament (Joe Lera, Fidelis Semoso), and several political newcomers with professional backgrounds in business or the PNG public service.

During the elections, COVID-19 measures were implemented in polling locations, including physical distancing, hand sanitizing, and the wearing of face masks and medical gloves. Several incidents were reported during voting that indicated irregularities or perhaps even foul play, but the Bougainville Electoral Commission defended the integrity of the process and blamed incidents on logistical problems and administrative errors, which were corrected. Election observers and scrutineers (appointed by candidates) were able to closely monitor voting and counting. The most serious problem was that a considerable number of voters could not vote because their names were not on the common roll. This is a regular feature of elections in PNG. This time around, however, it led to massive complaints because people compared the elections to the referendum a few months before, when the common roll was much more comprehensive and accurate. The referendum had been very well organized (not least because of more available funds and substantial international support), and voters who had expected the same level of professionalism for the elections were disappointed. Despite these problems, the vast majority of voters and candidates accepted the outcome of the elections,

and no official complaints against the results were launched.

The election period had to be extended because counting took longer than expected due to the high voter turnout. It was only on 24 September, more than a week later than originally planned, that the Bougainville Electoral Commission officially declared the results. Toroama won the presidential race. He is the former supreme commander of the secessionist Bougainville Revolutionary Army. He has a reputation as a brave and gifted warrior, and his followers regard him highly as a war hero and an uncompromising advocate for Bougainville's independence. He participated in the early stages of the peace process (he is a signatory to the Bougainville Peace Agreement), and he ran for president in the 2015 elections, finishing a distant second to Momis. After the war, he established himself as a successful businessman; today he presents himself as a cocoa farmer. He was involved in several local reconciliation processes and was a prominent participant in the high-level reconciliation ceremony between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, the Resistance Forces, and the PNG Defence Force in November 2019, when the former military leaders of the warring sides took the pledge of "no more war" (Boege 2020).

Toroama ran his election campaign under the banner of independence for Bougainville. Given his history as a leader of the independence struggle and his unflinching commitment to independence, large parts of the Bougainville population are obviously of the view that he is the best choice to turn the 97.7 percent of

the referendum into actual independence. Toroama deliberately dedicated his election win to the late Francis Ona and the late Joseph Kabui, the supreme leaders of the secessionist movement (*Post Courier* 2020). Several themes figured prominently in his election campaign, including fighting against corruption and for law and order, the strengthening of the Bougainville Police Service, and economic development and fiscal self-reliance.

The runner-up in the presidential elections is also a staunch protagonist of independence. Father Simon Dumarinu (a former Catholic priest who had to leave the priesthood to engage in politics) was the candidate of the Meekamui movement. The Meekamui are the "hard-core" faction of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, who for a long time did not join the peace and disarmament process. Only over the last few years have they gradually come into the fold, finally fully supporting the referendum, disarming, and participating in the elections. The fact that their presidential candidate came in second is an indication of the support their staunch independence position enjoys among large quarters of the Bougainville population.

The clear loser of the election was the dominant political force in the old ABG: former President Momis and his supporters. After it was clear that he could not contest again, Momis endorsed Thomas Raivet, the former acting chief secretary of the ABG, as his candidate. Raivet was widely seen as Momis's man. He only came in fourth.

Of the thirty-nine elected members of the House of Representatives, more

than two-thirds are newcomers. The most outstanding result, apart from Toroama's win, was the election of Theonila Roka Matbob from Enamira village in the constituency of Ioro, which is home to the Panguna mine. She was the only woman to be elected to an open seat. She has a reputation as a grassroots antimining activist and an outspoken critic of Panguna mine operations. She is a first cousin of Kabui, who was a leader of the secessionist movement during the war and served as the first Bougainville president from 2005 until his death in 2008.

Toroama was sworn in as president on 25 September 2020, and the new members of the House followed on 29 September. For the ceremony on 29 September, PNG Prime Minister James Marape flew in with a delegation of PNG ministers, senior PNG public servants, and heads of foreign missions, adding weight to the occasion. Speaking at the ceremony, Marape was full of praise for Toroama as a peacebuilder, saying that "he could think of no one better to lead Bougainville as the peace process entered a crucial phase," and he talked about consultations between the new Bougainville leadership and his government in order to "put in place a final road map for an enduring peace" (RNZ 2020e). But he did not mention independence. He only declared that he was "fully committed to working with the President-elect, Hon. Ishmael Toroama in finding a path that is truly a blessing for both PNG and Bougainville" (RNZ 2020d).

Furthermore, he again promised substantial support for Bougainville's economic development (RNZ

2020d). At the same time, however, he also said that "Bougainville's aspirations on self-determination must not harm the greater unity in Papua New Guinea" (New Dawn 2020c). Toroama, by contrast, announced that his government "will push hard for independence"; he envisages a "time-frame of two to three years" for negotiations with the GoPNG and wants to see Bougainville become independent within five years (Whiting 2020).

At the beginning of October, Toroama presented his government. The fourteen-member cabinet consists of a mix of old hands and new faces. The vice president is Patrick Nisira, who had already held this position in previous governments under Momis. He is also minister for economic development. Raymond Masono, the previous vice president and mining minister, lost those positions and was moved to the health ministry. The new mining minister—minister for mineral and energy resources—is Rodney Osioco. He was a fierce critic of the former Momis/Masono government's attempts to change the Bougainville Mining Act to the detriment of landowners and in favor of the Australian mining company Caballus.

Other important ministers are Thomas Tarii as minister for police and correctional services (like Toroama, Tarii is a former leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army) and Ezekiel Massat as minister for justice and post-referendum dialogue and consultation, as well as attorney general. Toroama also appointed two women as ministers: Yolande Geraldine Paul is minister for primary industries and marine resources, and Matbob is minister for education.

In his first government announcement, Toroama talked about the “winds of change” and declared that “change will be the theme of my government.” He outlined six priority areas, or “strategies,” for his presidency: “political control of our destiny” (the independence process); “economic growth and control” (which includes the mining issue); “administrative control” (fight against corruption, reform of the public service, law and order); “mobilizing private sector and civil society”; “long term vision and planning”; and “international relations” (Toroama 2020). He declared that the lives lost during the war and the 97.7 percent vote oblige him to lead Bougainville to independence.

Although Marape and Toroama had agreed to have a JSB meeting as soon as possible after the formation of a new ABG, such a meeting did not eventuate before the end of 2020. There was only a so-called “pre-JSB” meeting between Marape and Toroama on 9 November and a meeting of the Joint Technical Team (a group of high-ranking public servants and advisors from both sides in charge of JSB preparations) on 26 November.

At the 9 November meeting, Toroama and Marape decided to have a proper JSB meeting on 30 November 2020, and they agreed on an agenda. This agenda was to include, among other topics: the Post Referendum Joint Inter-Government Consultations Process Framework (including issues such as time frame, structure, joint secretariat, and ratification); “financial issues”; “fisheries”; and “transfer of BCL [Bougainville Copper Limited] shares to ABG” (ABG 2020g).

On 26 November, the Joint Technical Team met in Port Moresby in preparation for the planned JSB meeting. The Bougainville side sent a large, well-prepared delegation, including ABG ministers, senior public servants, and policy advisers. The Joint Technical Team endorsed sixteen recommendations, which were to be decided on at the JSB meeting. The recommendations took up topics from the preliminary meeting, refining and expanding them, including, among other things: setting up a permanent secretariat for the consultation process, clarifying the definition of “ratification” (of the referendum result), signing a revised fisheries agreement, and transferring BCL shares (ABG 2020f).

It was also recommended to ask Bertie Ahern, the former Irish prime minister who had been the head of the Bougainville Referendum Commission, to act as the international moderator for the consultations. Furthermore, an important clarification was made with regard to an announcement previously made by Marape—and taken up by Toroama—about the establishment of “foreign missions” in Bougainville (New Dawn 2020d). The Joint Technical Team meeting records now say “that the PM’s statement referred to Development Partners establishing Aid Offices” on Bougainville (ABG 2020f; see also ABG 2020e). This phrasing indicates much less than actual diplomatic posts in terms of political weight and competencies.

Although the Joint Technical Team elaborated these recommendations, it was already clear that the JSB meeting would not take place. It was canceled on short notice by the GoPNG due to the political turmoil within the

GoPNG and the PNG Parliament, with the opposition preparing a vote of no confidence in the prime minister and Marape fighting for his political survival. Under these circumstances, the GoPNG was not ready for a JSB meeting (RNZ 2020c). While the Joint Technical Team managed to carry out relevant preparatory work, in the absence of a proper decision-making JSB meeting, no actual political progress could be made. Substantial negotiations about the implementation of the referendum result had not started by the end of 2020, more than one year after the referendum.

The Bougainville side, however, has made it crystal clear that it is committed to independence. On 18 November, the House of Representatives passed a motion on the Bougainville Independence Mission. It announced preparations for independence according to a “trident strategy,” working at three levels: within Bougainville, with the PNG side, and at the international level. In the Bougainville context, the government is pursuing a “Constituency Independence Ready Concept,” similar to the previous “Referendum Ready” concept that guided pre-referendum activities (Bougainville House of Representatives 2020). Several constituencies have also commenced work on implementing constituency-level independence-ready concepts. Furthermore, the Bougainville side envisions a “Bougainville Independence Treaty,” which it plans to negotiate with the PNG side, as a decisive instrument for the ABG in the transition phase toward independence. Furthermore, the Bougainvilleans have set up a multilayered structure for the negotiations with their PNG counterparts, including a

Bougainville Leaders Consultation Forum, a Bougainville Consultation Team, and the Bougainville parties to the Joint Technical Team and Joint Supervisory Body.

The GoPNG and many in the PNG political class are not willing to grant Bougainville independence straight-away. The PNG side insists on the nonbinding character of the referendum and the PNG Parliament’s right of ratification as laid down in the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement. The delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic play into their hands—it is obvious that they are in no rush with the consultations. Furthermore, they try to shift the focus toward economic and financial issues, talking about “economic independence” for Bougainville and the need for the region to become financially self-reliant (see Marape, quoted in RNZ 2020d). The underlying argument is that Bougainville is economically and financially far too weak to become actually independent. In fact, around 90 percent of the ABG’s budget currently comes either from transfers from PNG or from development aid, mainly from Australia (Connell 2020, 386). The ABG is well aware of this situation, and in his first hundred days, Toroama has launched several initiatives to improve it and to increase the internal tax revenue (eg, the Manetai Limestone Project, the Integrated Agriculture Project in Buin, and the Tonolei Timber Development Project) (ABG 2020e; ABG 2020d; ABG 2020h). At the same time, it is clear that Bougainvilleans will not allow economic or financial considerations to be used as an argument against independence.

In the economic and financial



context, the most contentious issue in Bougainville, the future of the defunct Panguna gold and copper mine (Boege 2020), has gained prominence again. In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, discussions about this issue did not make much progress in 2020. While the previous ABG had argued that Bougainville needs the revenues from the Panguna mine to sustain its independence and therefore strongly supported reopening the mine, the Toroama government has taken a much more measured approach. It is determined to pursue other avenues—agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and small-scale alluvial mining—and has put the issue of reopening the Panguna mine on hold, well aware of its conflict-prone sensitivity and deep frictions among local stakeholders (ABG 2021). This stance might change in the future, given that the ABG will become the majority owner of Bougainville Copper Limited, the mine's former operator. In June 2016, Rio Tinto, the previous majority owner of Bougainville Copper Limited, divested from the company and transferred its shares to the GoPNG and the ABG, which made the two governments equal shareholders, with 36.4 percent of shares each. At that time, the ABG demanded all of the shares, arguing that Panguna was a Bougainville mine. After the referendum, in December 2019, Marape actually declared that the GoPNG would hand over its shares to the ABG. Consistent with this declaration, the JSB meeting on 12 March 2020 decided that the GoPNG would transfer its shares to the ABG-owned company Bougainville Minerals Limited, which is to “manage on behalf of

the ABG and the Panguna Landowners the shares” (ABG 2020c, 3). This would mean that the ABG would be in control of 72.8 percent of BCL shares. This decision, however, was not implemented. Therefore, the issue again had to be put on the agenda of the meetings in November 2020. At the end of 2020, the transfer still had not happened. These delays fit into the overall pattern of PNG's approach toward the Bougainville transition process.

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## FIJI

“Annus Horribilis,” a Latin phrase meaning “horrible year” used by Queen Elizabeth to describe 1992, is perhaps the most relevant description for 2020 in Fiji and, to a larger extent, the world. Apart from the implications of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Fiji struggled with three tropical cyclones, two of which were category-five systems. These challenges, among others, stretched not only the ruling government but also the opposition parties to their limits. This was especially so

when it came to articulating how best to protect and represent Fijians in 2020.

The year began with key environmental issues and concerns. The government publicized its Environmental Protection Model, which, among other things, targeted “Sea Based Marine Litter . . . through legislative and other measures to ensure that every Fijian has the right to a clean and healthy environment” (Fijian Government 2019). Part of this was focused on plastic pollution in waterways and the ocean. As a result, on 1 January 2020, an ambitious single-use plastic ban was legislated through the amendment of the Environment Management Act 2019. Interestingly, the ban did not apply to product packages, such as bread bags, or to items like garbage bags. Public confusion was rife as to what constituted a single-use plastic bag and how businesses and customers would have to adjust. Members of the public were already aware of and using reusable shopping bags, but the lack of clarity and necessary gradual adjustment for the public created more scrutiny. In addition, the public was warned of possible fines of up to F\$150,000 (approximately US\$71,900) or even conviction. Confusion was heightened when a levy of F\$.50 was applied for reusable plastic bags thicker than 50 microns (Radhika 2020). The promotion of these thicker alternatives over single-use plastic bags, some of which were already biodegradable, put into question the ban's intent to help protect the environment.

A month later, the people of Nahigatoka Village along the Coral Coast of Fiji's main island of Viti

Levu were seeking to secure their right to a clean and healthy environment (Nacei 2020b). As such, the village headman, through the village's opposition parliamentary representative, presented a petition for Parliament to refer the issue of magnetite mining to the Standing Committee on National Resources. The villagers were concerned about the environmental implications that the extractive plans would have for their food security and livelihood (Nacei 2020b). The Speaker of the House, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, claimed that Parliament did not have powers to accept the petition. This resulted in opposition members staging a walkout for the rest of the session and visiting the affected area of Nahigatoka the following day (Nacei 2020b). These incidents amplified and exposed ongoing inconsistencies between international pronouncements and domestic policy approaches and commitment.

The right to a clean, healthy, and safe environment has resonated with Fiji's ongoing climate-justice agenda on the international stage. In effect, this has catapulted Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama's global environmental reputation, culminating in his UN Champion of the Earth environmental award (United Nations Pacific 2020). Domestically, the impacts of climate change have included both village relocations and the escalation of cyclones (Piggott-McKellar, McNamara, and Nunn 2019). Through the year, Fiji was exposed to three tropical cyclones: Tino, Harold, and Yasa. In January, Tropical Cyclone Tino moved closer to the northern part of Fiji, passing the island of Rotuma before develop-

ing into a category-three cyclone as it exited Fiji's waters. Fortunately, reports indicated that it did not leave much destruction in its path (Chand 2020b). By April, Tropical Cyclone Harold, a category-four system, was anticipated to enter Fiji's waters with hurricane force winds of 195–275 kilometers per hour (Koi 2020). Tropical Cyclone Harold did not make landfall but still left significant damage across the country. There were even reports of tornado-like debris-filled winds that devastated homes and buildings (Chand and Talebula 2020). In the lead-up to Christmas Day in December, category-five Tropical Cyclone Yasa struck Fiji, hitting its second largest island, Vanualevu, with winds of up to 240 kilometers per hour, taking three lives and leaving hundreds homeless (Chand 2020c). Many families in the Northern Division were without electricity, water, and other essentials during the period between Christmas and New Year's Day. Fiji's catastrophic cyclones were widely seen as consequences of global warming, which reaffirmed Fiji's ongoing position on climate change in the international arena. Tropical Cyclone Harold alone was estimated to have cost Fiji over US\$40 million (RNZ 2020b). These natural disasters compounded the already challenging situation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiji recorded a total of forty-nine COVID-19 cases over the course of the year, including two deaths, forty-four recoveries, and three active cases as of late December (Fijian Government 2020). While all of these cases posed a great risk to Fiji, the first case exemplified and amplified Fiji's tumultu-

ous COVID-19 period, which peaked between March and June.

In late January, Fiji's minister for health, Ifereimi Waqainabete, announced that the Fijian government was closely monitoring Fiji's borders and taking advisories from the World Health Organization (Rawalai 2020). At that point, there were no bans in place on visitor arrivals from high-risk countries. A few days after the health minister's reassurances, four suspected COVID-19 cases transiting through Fiji to Sāmoa were denied entry in Sāmoa and sent back to Fiji (Chand 2020a). The Fijian government held its position that the borders were to stay open and that Fiji did not have any confirmed cases (Chaudhary 2020). The government's approach was seen as weak and questionable considering the seriousness of the international situation.

On 19 March, Fiji recorded its first COVID-19 case (Susu 2020b), a twenty-seven-year-old male flight attendant who had contracted the virus on a work trip to the United States (Nacei 2020a). He was asymptomatic on arrival and visited a number of major locations in the Western side of Fiji—including the Immigration Department, the mall, and a Zumba class in Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city—before developing respiratory symptoms (Nasiko 2020). This incident prompted the Fijian government to react more seriously, closing its borders to foreign nationals traveling from the United States, the United Kingdom, and all of Europe (Nacei 2020a). This was followed by the implementation on 19 March of a mandatory fourteen-day self-quarantine for those traveling into the coun-

try and a fourteen-day lockdown for Lautoka (RNZ 2020c). Contact tracing was initiated in Lautoka around where the first patient had visited, as well as on the flights he worked on during his travels to San Francisco and Auckland (Susu 2020a). Fiji Airways suspended 95 percent of its international routes to control border access and travel (Sayed-Khaiyum 2020). The fourteen-day Lautoka lockdown was further extended and then finally lifted, with specific restrictions, on 7 April.

This first major case exposed a national communications challenge for the Fijian government—namely, its ability to communicate with clarity and efficiency to the Fijian public. On the morning of 19 March, most people in Suva were aware that there was a confirmed case, as the patient's family members had confirmed speculations on social media. However, the Fijian government did not immediately confirm the case, instead delaying its scheduled press conference and adding to public panic and hysteria. As public pressure for answers mounted, the minister for health took to Twitter at around 1 PM to confirm the case (Susu 2020b). When the official press conference finally took place later that afternoon, most people in Fiji had already succumbed to “panic shopping” and were frantically trying to get their children out of schools to get home. By 25 March, Fiji had confirmed five cases.

Patient number 1 became the focal point of the first Fiji parliamentary session during the pandemic, which was held in late March. The government emphasized that the fourteen-day self-quarantine, while at that point voluntary, was a precaution that

needed to be followed. In contrast, the opposition argued that these measures were lax and that the airline itself had put the flight attendant back on the Auckland flight immediately after his return from the United States (Parliament of Fiji 2020). Sadly, the patient's name and various other details were openly used in Parliament as the tug-of-war of what should and should not have been done ensued. The biggest cost was to the patient and his family's privacy and dignity.

In March, the government announced a COVID-19 response budget, which included a US\$400 million stimulus package to support the country's health and employment sectors (RNZ 2020a). The much-needed health supplies and tools would help doctors and nurses prepare for and adjust to COVID-19 measures and conditions. People in the tourism industry who had lost their jobs, especially around Lautoka, would be able to support themselves by accessing their Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) accounts. In addition, the government was going to subsidize costs for those who did not have funds in their FNPF accounts. From April to December, employee and employer FNPF contributions were to be reduced from 10 to 5 percent (RNZ 2020a). These are just some of the aspects that the budget attempted to directly address. It was widely known at that point that the tourism industry—and, by extension, the western side of Fiji—was going to be dramatically affected.

Lockdowns and curfews were put in place to control movement and the risks that come with human contact during a pandemic. Over the course of the year, four different curfews were

ordered. The first, from 10 PM to 5 AM, began on 30 March (A Kumar 2020a). This was followed by an 8 PM–5 AM curfew implemented on 3 April. On 25 April, the curfew was reverted to 10 PM to 5 AM. The final curfew, still in place at the time of writing, was from 11 PM to 4 AM (A Kumar 2020a). By the end of December, a total of 3,792 people had been arrested for breaking curfew, out of which 1,701 were arrested for breaking social-gathering guidelines (A Kumar 2020a).

These curfews and their enforcement came into legal controversy on 14 May when High Court Justice Salesi Temo set aside fines on forty-nine cases relating to COVID-19 restrictions (V Kumar 2020a). Justice Temo stated that the fines of F\$300–\$2,000 (approximately US\$144–\$958) were hefty, especially for those who did not have the means to pay them. He further clarified that the fines violated Section 11(1) of the Bill of Rights in the 2013 constitution, which states that “every person has the right to freedom from . . . inhumane, degrading or disproportionately severe treatment or punishment” (V Kumar 2020a). The judge offered the case of nineteen-year-old Eileen Anderson, who had been arrested for a physical distancing breach while on a date with her boyfriend (V Kumar 2020b). He stated that the case exemplified the lacking “means test” that magistrates must carry out before sentencing (V Kumar 2020c). The university student was clearly unemployed and a first-time offender, and while the court's powers were enhanced by the COVID-19 Response Amendment Act 2020 and other relevant legislation, the

sentencing of high fines was incongruent with the Bill of Rights. Given this, Justice Temo ordered magistrates to resentence the forty-nine cases after carrying out an appropriate means test (V Kumar 2020a). Four days later, Acting Chief Justice Kamal Kumar stated that Justice Temo's decision had no legal effect, arguing that under Section 260(2) of the Criminal Procedure Act 2009, Justice Temo could only exercise this decision subject to the receipt of a report from the chief justice calling for such actions to be taken (V Kumar 2020d). There was widespread public confusion over the matter, especially considering the large number of arrests that had been made during the height of the restrictions.

The legal implications of COVID-19 also had ramifications for social media use. In late March, opposition MP Lynda Tabuya was charged with one count of malicious act for breaching the Public Order Act (Movono 2020). It was claimed that Tabuya's Facebook posts were intended to "to create or foster public alarm, anxiety or disaffection" (Movono 2020). On the same charge and allegation, within the same period, Nemani Bainivalu, FijiFirst's failed 2014 elections candidate, was also charged with spreading misinformation and violating the Public Order Act (A Kumar 2020b). Both public figures had made social media posts regarding the COVID-19 cases and were seen to be in breach of the Public Order Act. Tabuya was acquitted later in the year when the director of the Public Prosecutions Office withdrew the charges against her in court (R Kumar 2020). Another incident involving the opposition MP Lenora Qereqeretabua resulted in

the dismissal of high-school teacher Kishore Kumar by the Ministry of Education. Kumar had been accused of making salacious and false claims against Qereqeretabua for months on social media. Kumar went further to claim that he had been paid by a parliamentarian to amplify those claims (Narayan 2020a). Public speculation that the ruling government was possibly involved ensued. This speculation, a police complaint, and a highly publicized letter to the minister of education forced the government to address the matter. Kumar was dismissed from the Ministry of Education and subsequently charged.

These incidents validated a number of key concerns regarding social media in Fiji. Fiji's social media landscape is increasing dramatically, with a greater number of users within Fiji than ever before (Tarai 2019, 2020; Tarai and others 2015). The government is thus compelled to take social media discussions seriously and with great caution (Tarai 2018b)—even more so with public figures and their online supporters.

The month of June saw the University of the South Pacific (USP) rocked with controversy when its recently appointed vice chancellor and president, Professor Pal Ahluwalia, was suspended earlier in the month (Ravuwai 2020). Controversy at the university began in March 2019 when a leaked draft of an eleven-page report by Ahluwalia exposed varying allegations of financial and policy abuses that had resulted in questionable appointments and a whole host of other concerning executive decisions by the previous administration (Wansolwara 2020b). Ahluwalia's

suspension was decided by an executive committee of the USP Council, chaired by former diplomat and long-serving bureaucrat Winston Thompson (Ravuwai 2020). Thompson became one of the most disliked and divisive figures among staff and students in the regional institution, largely because when the eleven-page report became public knowledge, Thompson openly declared that he wanted to sack the new vice chancellor and president (Pareti 2019). Ahluwalia was later reinstated by the USP Council, who did not endorse the suspension that Thompson had orchestrated. Staff and student associations representing the main and regional campuses called for Thompson's removal from the USP Council (Swami 2020; Narayan, Turaga, and Krishant 2020). At the height of the controversy, USP staff and students were monitored and intimidated by Fiji Police under the guise of COVID-19 gathering restrictions (Wansolwara 2020a). The eleven-page report was validated by BDO, an Auckland based accounting firm that was endorsed by the USP Council to investigate the report's claims (Magick 2019). The BDO report detailed a variety of management positions, policies, and systematic abuses that culminated in the issues Ahluwalia outlined (Field, 2020). Some of the individuals who were alleged to be at the forefront of these abuses were seen to be closely linked to Fiji's ruling government (RNZ 2021). This speculated link became more pronounced with continued government interferences, ranging from the surveillance and monitoring of staff and students to FijiFirst's parliamentary denials and the down-

playing of abuses detailed in the BDO report (Narayan 2020b). The USP saga is emblematic of the current Fiji government's interventionist approach toward regional institutions and established Pacific norms. This approach has continued to threaten and undermine Pacific regionalism, while throwing into question Fiji's own commitment to the Pacific, its history, and long-held relationships.

While Fiji was struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, category-five cyclones, and the undermining of regionalism, its main opposition party appeared to be struggling with itself. The Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) had gained six more seats in the 2018 national elections compared to the 2014 national elections (Tarai 2018a). Many of the votes were gained by the party's controversial leader, former prime minister and 1987 coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka. However, since his return in 2016, Rabuka has become a polarizing figure within the party (Tarte 2016), and the party has been fraught with internal divisions and bickering. There are a number of factions within the party that inevitably clash from time to time, the most prominent being the traditional and provincial loyalties, who are tied to high-ranking chiefs within the party. On the other end are those who try to maneuver within these loyalties to push for reform that aligns with democratic and modernist ideals. Rabuka has been at the center of these varying interests, trying to balance and mediate these divisions in hopes of keeping the party united.

Unfortunately, these interests and tensions escalated to such an overwhelming extent that on 7 December,



Rabuka announced his resignation in Parliament (Kate 2020). His resignation was not only from his post as the leader of the opposition but also, a few days later, from his role as a SODELPA member. He claimed that he was “making way” for a new opposition leader to be able to work with Prime Minister Bainimarama across the parliamentary aisle (Kate 2020). SODELPA members appeared disheveled, with some in complete shock, on national television. Most supporters expressed concern but acknowledged the tensions and divisions within party. Within days of his resignation, Rabuka announced that he was going to form a new political party and set about meeting the requirements to register for the 2022 national elections. Since he had gathered the lion’s share of the votes and support in 2018, SODELPA now appears even more vulnerable and more divided.

As the year came to a close, the impacts of COVID-19 and the tropical cyclones had ravaged Fiji’s economy, society, and politics. For Fiji, like the rest of the world, 2020 was truly “Annus Horribilis.”

JOPE TARAI

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## KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA

The year under review was disrupted by the convergence of three major factors: the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, like elsewhere in the world; the second self-determination ballot on 4 October; and protests and violent disturbances over the mining industry.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused global social and economic turmoil all over the world, but the handling of the pandemic has had a special character in Kanaky New Caledonia. Pursuant to the statutory Organic Law, the government of New Caledonia is in charge of public health and border health control; however, the prime minister of France established a state of health emergency throughout the national territory, including New Caledonia. Even though the country did not have any community transmission, the French high commissioner, in a joint order with the loyalist president of the local government, Thierry Santa, implemented a lockdown period from 17 March to 20 April. It seemed necessary to do the same as in France. Thanks to the suspension of international flights, New Caledonia has remained COVID-19-free. When flights were cautiously resumed, a fourteen-day quarantine in a dedicated environment (ie, Nouméa hotels) was prescribed for all arrivals. There was general consensus in New Caledonia on this specific point. Nevertheless, the Union Calédonienne (Caledonian Union [UC], a party in the independence coalition Socialist Kanak National Liberation Front [FLNKS]) contested the French state's

taking over of the country's powers and referred the matter to the French Conseil d'Etat (highest administrative court), with the aim of having the state of health emergency canceled. Furthermore, the Caledonian Union referred the French law (as a priority question of constitutionality) to the French Constitutional Council, who rejected the appeal on the grounds that everything related to public freedom is the exclusive responsibility of the French state (Constitutional Council of France 2020). To the contrary, for the Conseil d'Etat, the purpose of the measure is to decide whether the French state or New Caledonia is responsible. The paradoxical consequence is that New Caledonia, which is responsible for health control at its borders, cannot set up a system of quarantine by itself because it infringes on public freedom. The pro-independence parties felt that this undermined French confidence in New Caledonia by allowing the French state to take over jurisdiction that had been permanently transferred to New Caledonia under the Nouméa Accord. It also damaged confidence in the president of the New Caledonian government, who failed to defend the country's jurisdiction. Thus, the handling of the pandemic confirmed that France remains a highly centralized country.

The year 2018 had seen the first self-determination ballot on 4 November. A massive "no" to independence had generally been expected. However, the big surprise of this first referendum was that the "no" result was neither clear-cut nor massive, which the independentist parties quickly interpreted as a "yes, maybe" or a "yes, soon." From 2018 to 2020, the

gap was sharply reduced between the two camps. The turnout in 2020 was overwhelming at 85.69 percent. According to the final results of the 4 October 2020 referendum, out of 180,799 registered voters, 53.26 percent voted "no" to independence and 46.74 percent "yes" (High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2020b). Only 9,570 votes separated the "yes" votes from the "no" votes, compared to 18,535 in 2018. This means that by fewer than five thousand people changing their minds, the majority would switch to full sovereignty. These results show a society more divided than ever on the "day after."

Although the French state claims a position of arbiter—and rarely that of decolonizer—it offered a little help to nonindependence activists in the second campaign. First, it granted the right to use the French tricolor flag in official campaign documents. Second, in the official letter from the French government to the New Caledonians, the French state refused to write anything reassuring about the day after in terms of a future discussion between the future independent state and France, thus creating the feeling of emptiness the loyalists wanted. Finally, it restricted the use of proxies, multiplying technical obstacles to vote, and offered Islanders living in the south of New Caledonia the extra opportunity to register at special polling stations in Nouméa. However, this did not have many consequences, and in the end, the result was "a No with the taste of a Yes" (Tutugoro 2020).

What emerged first from the ballot was a huge Kanak nationalist feeling around the Kanak flag (also called the

“flag of Kanaky” because loyalists have always contested it as the common flag of the country). However, since 2010, the French tricolor and the Kanak flag must be systematically hoisted together as symbols of the country’s identity. In the second consultation, young people turned out to vote in massive numbers and went out everywhere to show their joy with thousands of Kanak flags. This nationalism, which was rather good-natured and not aggressive, was scary for some. As a result, despite being victorious in the second consultation, the Loyalists (a coalition of six anti-independence groups) wanted the results from the Nouméa polling stations in the northern pro-independence electoral districts to be annulled on the grounds that the access roads to the polling stations had been besieged and the freedom to vote had not been respected. The mere presence of the Kanak in the “European” city was unbearable to them. But the reality was that 25 percent of voters in Nouméa had voted “yes.” There were now more “yes” votes in the Southern Province than in the pro-independence Northern Province alone.

This nationalist wave, which was initially Kanak, was joined by some young Europeans in Nouméa. Youth was a determining factor in the “yes” vote. To use the lucid analysis made by the nonindependence party Calédonie Ensemble (Caledonia Together), which had refused to join with the Loyalists, it was no longer possible to win more “no” votes. Loyalist neighborhoods in the southern urban area voted as much as possible; however, the “no” won three thousand absolute votes and declined in percentage

everywhere, even outside of Nouméa and on the west coast, as pointed out by Philippe Dunoyer, Philippe Michel, and Philippe Gomès at a colloquium at the University of New Caledonia on 8 October (Calédonie Ensemble 2020). The loyalist parties’ anti-Kanak fear campaign was no longer enough. While it kept the older and more radical voters in favor of the “no” vote, it no longer broadened its support. Only 74 percent of eligible voters in the Loyalty Islands province voted due to practical obstacles. If that province had voted like the Northern Province, at 89 percent, the pro-independence parties could have had 3,000 more votes. The increase in participation and the new registration of young people greatly benefited the “yes”: while the “no” won 3,000 votes, the “yes” gained 11,400.

Ultimately, the independence coalition FLNKS campaigned for reassurance, offering a three-year transition period to negotiate the “partnership” with France (the French buzzword for “associated state”) and to establish international cooperation. It also sought to organize, after two years, a referendum of the citizens of the new Kanaky New Caledonia on a constitution of the country and the relationship with France. All of this was done to allow the first rallies beyond the Kanak ethnic circle. Seamless independence was offered and described as the success of the Nouméa Accord.

In November and December, there were roadblocks and demonstrations across New Caledonia. These protests were called by the Usine du Sud = Usine Pays collective (Southern Plant = Country’s Plant), which unites customary chiefs, environmental groups,

trade unionists, and FLNKS members. In response, French loyalists armed with hunting rifles mounted the roadblocks, leading the French authorities to ban the transport or carrying of weapons. The immediate dispute was over which consortium could bid for the Goro nickel smelter and the other assets of Vale Nouvelle-Calédonie, the local subsidiary of the Brazilian corporation Vale, one of the largest mining companies in the world. Vale announced its decision to leave New Caledonia in December 2019, and it intended to pull out of New Caledonia by the end of 2020, threatening three thousand jobs. However, the battle over Vale's assets hid a deeper struggle. Can the local people control New Caledonia's extensive natural resources, including nearly a quarter of the world's reserves of nickel, as they move toward a new political status (Maclellan 2020)?

In April, the Northern Province's development arm, Sofinor, announced a preliminary bid for Vale Nouvelle-Calédonie's assets, in partnership with Korea Zinc. The Korean corporation is one of the world's leading producers of zinc and other metals and has extensive industrial experience in hydrometallurgy. Under the bid, the three provinces would jointly hold majority shares in a new venture, giving control of the smelter to New Caledonia. Some 20,500 hectares of mining titles would be returned to local control, amounting to nearly 8 percent of the territory's mining area. However, loyalists in Nouméa opposed any expansion of Sofinor into the Southern Province. "Those who propose this have a desire to economically colonize the Southern Province,"

said Sonia Backès, president of the Southern Province and one leader of the anti-independence coalition Avenir en Confiance (Future in Confidence) (LNC 2020a). Vale began discussions with the Australian company New Century Resources, but after widespread local opposition, New Century withdrew from talks on 8 September. By then, Vale Nouvelle-Calédonie's managing director, Antonin Beurrier, had revealed details of Sofinor's bid, indicated that it was not acceptable, and sought other partners. He offered exclusive negotiations until 4 December, with the aim of closing the sale in January 2021. Then, in a late October surprise, Beurrier announced the creation of a new company, Prony Resources Nouvelle-Calédonie. Half of the shares in this entity would be held by New Caledonian interests, while the Swiss commodity trading house Trafigura would hold another quarter. FLNKS leaders were angered that Trafigura would be given priority over the bid from Korea Zinc. "Trafigura is only an intermediary," said the FLNKS's Victor Tutugoro. "It's only interested in buying the smelter and the mining titles in order to resell them when the market for nickel is more active, drawing down the maximum amount of profit" (Maclellan 2020).

There is also an environmental concern about the wet tailings storage dam, "which is enormous at 1.3 kilometers long . . . and 60 meters high" (Cornaille 2020). On 7 December 2020, the main road along the waterfront in Nouméa was blocked with barricades, burning tires, and rocks. Riot police moved in, firing rounds of tear gas and flash balls to disperse the demonstrators. On 10 December,

the southern plant was evacuated, and the police had to use weapons to repel the demonstrators. Dumpsters, vehicles, and the administrative part of the factory were set on fire. On 12 December, a massive loyalist demonstration of more than twenty thousand people was held in Nouméa to protest the blockades and disorder. On 17 December, Calédonie Ensemble, which had refused a front with the Loyalists, asked for “a temporary nationalization of the plant through a takeover by the French state of this strategic asset” (*La Première* 2020a). On 29 December, Tutugoro said FLNKS also wanted a temporary takeover of the southern factory by the French state. In the meantime, the FLNKS has suspended all discussions on the institution’s future.

French Overseas Minister Sébastien Lecornu had a long stay in New Caledonia (three weeks beginning in mid-October) “to renew the threads of dialogue” (*LNC* 2020e). After complying with the mandatory fourteen-day quarantine, the minister opened negotiations on the future on the island of Leprédour, near Boulouparis. The idea was to isolate ten politically important people so they could speak freely and without double-speak (attendees were Paul Néaoutyine, Victor Tutugoro, Daniel Goa, Roch Wamytan, and Jacques Lalié for the FLNKS and Philippe Gomès, Philippe Dunoyer, Pierre Frogier, Thierry Santa, and Sonia Backès for Calédonie Ensemble and the Loyalists) (*LNC* 2020c). To achieve this, he launched a joint political message with the mayor of Nouméa: remove the statue of Governor Olry (the man who repressed the Kanak uprising of 1878)

on the Place des Cocotiers (the main square in downtown Nouméa) and replace it with a statue of the handshake between Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Jacques Lafleur, who were at the origin of the Matignon Agreements in 1988, the predecessor of the Nouméa Accord. Only the first meeting brought together all of the participants.

The year ended without political dialogue other than bilaterally between the French state and either the FLNKS or the nonindependentists. However, the political lines appeared to be slowly moving: in 2019, Roch Wamytan had been elected president of the Congress, and this majority had brought together the pro-independence parties and the three Congress members from Eveil Océanien (Oceanian Awakening), a party mainly representing migrants from Uvea (Wallis) and Futuna, most of whom are nonindependentist. In the words of Eveil Océanien leader Milakulo Tukumuli, it was thus “an Oceanian majority, which is not a pro-independence majority” (*La Première* 2019). In 2020, this majority renewed Wamytan as president of Congress, and the three elected members of Congress from Eveil Océanien joined the UC-FLNKS political group. Demonstrating the implications of his new political positioning, in December 2020, Tukumuli, the third vice president of the Southern Province, voted against the province’s budget.

In early November, the banishment of 120 people from Guahma on the island of Maré highlighted an emerging political division between radical Indigenous activists and the FLNKS. The high chief of the district expelled the 120 people after destroying their



houses on the grounds that they had contested the right of the chief to choose the tribe's pastor (La Première 2020b). In New Caledonia, political, customary, and religious powers are traditionally separate, so the high chief's insistence on the superiority of custom over all other powers had led him to vote "no" in the referendum. This exemplifies how opposite extreme political groups can come together to advocate the separate development of populations instead of a common destiny of populations, which was praised by the FLNKS and the moderate political parties. Even so, the municipal elections confirmed political stability, with a net gain of one municipality for the pro-independence parties. The first round of municipal elections took place on 15 March 2020 in the thirty-three municipalities, and the second round, which had been postponed due to the COVID-19 health crisis, took place on 28 June (High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2020a).

The pandemic has wreaked havoc everywhere; in New Caledonia, the situation is mixed. The nickel crisis has worsened, and public deficits have skyrocketed, while the halting of international flights has benefited a country that is structurally closed in on itself. In addition, the country is now regularly losing inhabitants. By 2020, the loss of mining operators was such that the government opened up mining exports. The independentists voted against this because they wanted to reserve the resource for local transformation. New Caledonia has never exported so much raw ore, despite having three operating plants (ISEE 2020a). The French Cour des

Comptes (Court of Auditors) once again condemned excessive aid given to the nickel sector (LNC 2020b).

On the surface, the economic damage of the health crisis is invisible thanks to a generous unemployment benefit system, which might actually be too generous. Since no one can really go on vacation abroad and since civil and public servants have had no loss of wages, lodges and bush hotels are full, agricultural fairs are breaking records, and consumption is steady. However, France lent money to New Caledonia, and the conditions of the loan, accompanied by compulsory clauses of post-crisis austerity, caused controversy in Congress, with Calédonie Ensemble and the FLNKS denouncing the loss of the country's sovereignty (LNC 2020d). Meanwhile, the 2019 census, published in 2020, confirmed that migratory flows have reversed. Due to a lack of jobs and perhaps a lack of confidence, part of the European population is leaving the country as entry flows slow (there were around two thousand net departures per year between 2014 and 2019 [ISEE 2020b]).

This unusual year will paradoxically continue until 31 March 2021: all of the most important choices have been postponed. The country's budget has not yet been voted on, and the vote has been postponed until 31 March at the latest. Due to the health crisis, aid has been extended and support mechanisms will not end until late March (probably to coincide with the budget vote). The Santa government's resignation or overthrow by a vote of no confidence is still awaited. Discussions around the mining "pre-condition" (for continued political

talks) will last until the end of March, and the political discussions on the future will not resume before this. A request for the third referendum is only possible from 5 April. Much from the year 2020 remains unresolved.

To end on a more optimistic note, the second campus of the University of New Caledonia, built on the customary land of Baco in Koné, Northern Province, was inaugurated on 18 July. This will serve as a rebalancing tool for the future of the country.

MATHIAS CHAUCHAT

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## PAPUA

To mark the 2020 International Human Rights Day in Papua, 147 Catholic priests of Papua released a moral appeal to all parties involved in Papua's conflict, including church leaders, the government, the security apparatus, investors, and the Majelis Rakyat Papua (Papuan People's Council), as well as the Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat (TPNPB, West Papua National Liberation Army). They urged these parties to uphold dialogue in order to stop violence across Papua. At the end of the appeal, the priests stressed: "We, the priests of Papua, agree and strongly offer an approach of dialogue. This approach becomes a new and dignified policy to develop a stable, just, peaceful, and prosperous Papua. At the same time, [we] categorically reject and condemn violent acts in this land" (Pastor Kato-lik Papua 2020; translation mine).

It is important to note the use of the word "condemn," which is quite unusual for a document from the Catholic hierarchy. The statement sums up the general concern of the Papuan public. On the one hand, it expresses a sense of frustration, anger, and desperation at the protracted violence that has caused the loss of so many lives in Papua, especially in the Central Highlands. On the other, it reflects the priests' determination and hope to address the protracted conflict in a peaceful way. Their optimism remains strong. "It is the way to remind the government that they need to hold a dialogue with Papua as *the* way to address the conflict," said Fr John Bunay, the New Coordinator of Jaringan Damai Papua (Papua

Peace Network) (pers comm, 3 March 2021).

If we look back to the frequency of security incidents in the Central Highlands of Papua in 2019, at least thirty such incidents occurred in the districts of Nduga, Puncak, Intan Jaya, and Mimika. Therefore, the priests' concerns are justified. Since the killing of road workers at the end of 2018 (Hernawan 2019, 536), the activities of the TPNPB have increased exponentially. No longer limited to the district of Nduga, they have expanded to the neighboring districts. Eleven TPNPB groups actively operate in these districts and have territorial control in various areas within them.

This situation also means a significant increase in the operations of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (the Indonesian national military), which has been deployed to hunt down the TPNPB. Joint forces of the military and the police have frequently engaged the TPNPB in these districts, leaving casualties on both sides. Those bearing weapons also target civilians. As a result, the local residents have been caught in the ongoing armed conflict, which has forced many to leave their homes and take refuge outside of their home districts. Some of them have managed to go to other towns as far as Nabire, Enarotali, or Timika, while others have scattered throughout the bush or are unaccounted for. Schools, markets, local government offices, and airstrips have been closed for months.

The situation in Intan Jaya in particular became worse in the second part of the year when three church workers were either killed or wounded. The first case was the killing of Rev Yeremia Zanambani,

who was found dead in his pig stall on 19 September 2020. The second case occurred on 7 October 2020, when Agustinus Duwitau, a Catholic Church worker, was shot and wounded (Lantipo 2020). A witness told the media that Duwitau was carrying an air rifle for hunting, so the security forces might have thought he was a member of the TPNPB. The incident occurred when the Papuan Provincial Council's task force was about to leave the Sugapa airstrip, so they were not able to handle it. The third case happened on 26 October 2020, when Rufinus Tigau, a Catholic catechist, was shot dead by the army in his own yard and was buried without permission from his family (Mambor 2020). He was accused of being a member of the TPNPB, which Fr Martin Kuayo, the apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Timika, categorically denied. In his media statement (Dagur 2020), Fr Kuayo clarified that Tigau had been the assistant of the parish priest of Bilogai and had played an important role in church services.

The series of violent acts, especially the killing of Rev Zanambani, prompted four institutions to conduct independent investigations. The Coordinating Ministry for Security, Political and Legal Affairs established a joint fact-finding team, Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta (TGPF), for Intan Jaya; the governor of Papua established Tim Kemanusiaan untuk Intan Jaya (the Humanitarian Team for Intan Jaya); and the Papua Provincial Council deployed Pansus untuk Intan Jaya (Special Taskforce for Intan Jaya). Komnas HAM (the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights), however, did not establish a

special team, instead sending its regular investigation team. Independently, each team released a conclusion that found the same pattern of direct involvement of the Indonesian army in the pastor's killing. Komnas HAM categorizes the act as an extrajudicial killing (Komnas HAM 2020).

Only two of the teams, Komnas HAM (2020) and the Humanitarian Team for Intan Jaya (2020), specifically identified the main suspect, Sergeant Alpius Hasim Madi, the deputy commander of the subdistrict military command (Koramil) of Hita-dipa. Komnas HAM found detailed evidence showing that the suspect had tortured the victim before executing him. Both Komnas HAM and TGPF separately recommended that the government hold pengadilan koneksitas, a joint civil and martial court, to hear the case since it involves both civilian and military personnel. To date, however, there has been no sign that the government will implement the recommendation.

Whereas the case of Rev Zanambani has been investigated and remains pending of a court hearing, there has been no investigation into the other cases whatsoever. We can suspect the reasons behind it: (1) the two other victims are not as prominent as Rev Zanambani, and (2) unlike the Indonesian Council of Churches, which made an appeal to the president to undertake a thorough investigation, the Catholic Church only minimally pressured the relevant authorities to take action. Fr Kuayo dismissed the accusation made by the police and the army, but he did not appeal for judicial investigation into the case. Similarly, the bishops of Papua did

not request an investigation into any specific cases when they met with Coordinating Minister for Security, Political and Legal Affairs Mahmud MD. Instead, they discussed the more general issue of resolving conflict in Papua (Watkins 2020).

The three cases are central to understanding the impact of the conflict in the Central Highlands not only on the local residents but, more importantly, on the broader social and political landscape of Papua. The role of the church in the remote parts of Papua is significant. Beginning in the Dutch colonial period, churches of various denominations were the pioneers of the development of Papua's interior, building infrastructure such as airstrips and local roads to connect it with the outside world. The churches were also the first providers of basic services, especially agriculture, education, and health services. This historical legacy has cemented trust and a strong relationship between churches and Indigenous Papuans across the Central Highlands. At the same time, the church has become part of Papuans' identity. Therefore, when they witnessed their church workers being targeted, they had no choice but to leave their homes because they believed that their ultimate safeguard had been destroyed.

From Intan Jaya District, the Diocese of Timika reported that hundreds of internally displaced persons have taken refuge in the St Misael Parish of Bilogai, with minimal humanitarian assistance. The parish priest, Fr Yustinus Rahangiar, has been trying to cope with the multiple burdens of dealing with internally displaced persons. On the one hand, he has to deal with

armed men, and on the other, he has to attend to the humanitarian needs of hundreds of people.

The problem of internally displaced persons is not novel to Papua. We learned from the Nduga conflict that the outflux of internally displaced persons to other districts has increased significantly in the last three years (Hernawan 2020, 579–580). The 2020 joint report of the Foundation for Justice and Integrity of the Papuan People; the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Desk of the Papuan Tabernacle Church; the Papuan Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy; and the International Coalition for Papua documents at least 41,851 internally displaced persons in the five districts from August 2019 to April 2020. These individuals live in dire conditions, such as overcrowded temporary shelters or relatives' homes. They suffer from malnutrition, sickness, exhaustion, and hypothermia; as a result, some 214 internally displaced persons died in 2019.

The ongoing armed violence has prompted the solidarity movement for Papua to push for a change for the better in Papua. At the national level, the movement gained significant victories in two legal cases that could create precedents for the future. The first victory was that of the so-called Balikpapan seven—Fery Gombo, Alexander Gobay, Hengki Hilapok, Buchtar Tabuni, Irwanus Uropmabin, Stevanus Itlay, and Agus Kossay—who had been charged with treason for organizing a rally to protest racial discrimination against Papuans in Jayapura in 2019. Although the alleged crime took place in Jayapura, the court hearing was moved to Balikpapan,

without the inditees' permission, at the insistence of the Papua police, who argued that there were risks in Jayapura that would jeopardize the trial.

Despite the long distance and difficult communication, the alliance between civil society organizations in Jayapura and Balikpapan managed to establish an effective collaboration to put pressure on the government and the judges to release the inditees. While the prosecutors had asked for long prison sentences, on 17 June 2020, the judges sentenced the inditees to eleven-months of imprisonment, which was quite unexpected (Firdaus 2020). The lenient sentence cannot be separated from strong public pressure from the Papuan Provincial Council, the Papuan People's Council, Catholic priests, and other religious leaders of Papua (ICP 2020b), which also coincided with the global Black Lives Matter campaign.

The second victory was the lawsuit submitted by Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Pers (Legal Aid for Press), Alliance of Independent Journalists, Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation), and Safenet against the president of Indonesia and the minister of information regarding the Internet shutdown in Papua during the protest against racist attacks on Papuan students from August to September 2019. On 3 June 2020, the Jakarta State Administrative Court ruled that the president and the minister of information had acted unlawfully in approving the shutdown (Adjie 2020). The verdict was quite unexpected, as there was no precedent for the state losing a court battle that involved Papua. The

ruling also established that the Indonesian administration not only uses security forces and the law to suppress Papuan activism but also shuts down the Internet to prevent Papuan activists from communicating with the outside world.

In another court hearing, however, the Indonesian students' show of solidarity for Papua lost one battle. Four students from Khairun University in Ternate (the capital of North Maluku Province) were expelled from their campus for joining the rally on 2 December 2019, which called on the government to release Papuan political prisoners and grant Papuan self-determination (Blades 2020). The university claimed that the students had committed treason by joining the rally. Indonesian rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, argued that the university should support academic freedom and freedom of expression, as the students had expressed their views peacefully.

The students were members of the Front of Indonesian People for West Papua (FRI-WP), which campaigns for Papua's self-determination—a rather uncommon agenda for solidarity movements for Papua. Both national and international rights groups tend to focus on the human rights agenda and keep their distance when it comes to Papuan self-determination, as they believe it belongs to the realm of politics, not human rights. Therefore, FRI-WP is quite unique in the current landscape. The chair of FRI-WP, Surya Anta, was jailed for leading a rally by raising the Papuan flag in front of the State Palace on 28 August 2019 (Hernawan 2020), so it was not too surprising to see FRI-WP members launching the same campaign. Another

interesting element was the location, Ternate. While geographically it is closer to Papua than to Jakarta, the city is not known for activism.

While the armed conflict hit the Central Highlands, the heated debate over the extension of Special Autonomy (Otsus) funds preoccupied the urban centers. A movement of twenty-nine organizations in Papua launched a petition of the Papuan people against the second stage of Special Autonomy (Otsus II) on 22 July 2020 in the office of the Dewan Adat Papua (the Papuan Customary Council). In a YouTube message on 26 November 2020, Viktor Yeimo, the spokesperson of Parlemtan Rakyat Papua (Parliament of the Papuan People), stressed that “the Papuan people from almost all components in Papua have supported the Petition against Otsus. They have conveyed it through seminars, webinars and other activities that 19 years of special autonomy in West Papua has failed to bring upon protection and empowerment for Papuans” (quoted in ICP 2020d). He explained that 102 organizations had already signed the petition, which lists the following demands:

- 1 All West Papuans, inside and outside of West Papua, shall not be provoked by Indonesia's polarizing politics and manipulative development projects in West Papua;
- 2 All West Papuans, inside and outside of West Papua, shall support the Petition against Otsus II for the democratic consolidation of unity;
- 3 All Papuans shall continue with the mobilisation for the implementation of a peaceful national civil strike in support for the right to self-determination;

- 4 The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSP), Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) and the United Nations shall immediately monitor and urge Indonesia to allow the realisation of the right to self-determination for the Papuan people. (ICP 2020d)

The response to Otsus II has not been limited to Papuan activists. The Papuan People's Council (MRP) issued a plan to hold public consultations in both provinces (Papua and West Papua, the latter having been split in 2003) on 17 and 18 November 2020 to collect feedback from the Papuan people. The plan immediately met with a response from the Papua chief of police, Paulus Waterpauw, who issued a decree banning such gatherings on the grounds of preventing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (ICP 2020a).

In the end, the public consultations did not work well. In Wamena, a group of Papuans blocked the Wamena airport for six hours, so the MRP team was forced to cancel the plan for consultation on 15 November and returned to Jayapura the same day (Fadhilah 2020). In Merauke, the police raided the public consultation held on 18 November and arrested fifty-four people for breaching health protocols for the prevention of COVID-19 (Suwandi 2020); meanwhile, other groups held a rally in the city opposing the consultation (Merauke 2020). A consultation planned for the district of Dogiyai was also canceled, but hundreds of Papuans gathered on 17 November to voice their rejection of the revision of the Special Autonomy Law.

During the public consultation in Raja Ampat in August 2020, the

People's Council of West Papua Province (MRPB) received a clear message from the various Papuan groups who rejected the revision of Otsus since they did not enjoy the benefits of the law (Media Corruption Watch 2020). The chair of the MRPB, Maxsi Nelson Ahoren, publicly warned the government and the provincial council of West Papua Province not to act on their own initiatives but instead to listen to the people's aspirations: "The creation of new administration (pemekaran) and the increase of the budget for the West Papua Province will never satisfy the people who demand justice" (Kapisa 2021).

Similarly, the residents of Nabire and Timika took to the streets on 23 and 24 September to express their objection to Otsus II, and the police responded with mass arrests (ICP 2020c). In Manado, on 21 September, Papuan students organized a rally to launch the petition against the Special Autonomy Law and to demand self-determination. The police placed road-blocks and used tear gas to disburse the rally (ICP 2020e). The geographical spread shows that this was not an isolated incident.

The position of the central government was clear. Mahfud MD stated that there would be no revision of Otsus except for an extension of its special budget period, whereas the chair of the national Parliament, Bambang Susatyo, supported the idea of creating new provinces and splitting Papua into five (Saputro 2020). This idea is strongly opposed by most Papuan actors.

Together, the opposing groups, the involvement of the MRP in both provinces, the police intervention, and the statements by the national elite



already demonstrate that the revision of Otsus is a highly politicized issue. It is no longer simply a matter of revising a law. On the contrary, it is all about perception of the law in relation to state sovereignty. For Papuans, the revision of the law has been perceived as an intrusion of the state into their sovereign lives, whereas for the state authorities, the law is the way the state governs Papua regardless of Papuans' perceptions.

Amid all of the divisions and oppositions, the Catholic priests' collective voice serves as a timely reminder to all stakeholders to refrain from using violence and instead resort to dialogue. Their concerns might also relate to the internal dynamics within the churches in Papua, where division also prevails. Four major denominations—Gereja Kristen Injil (Evangelical Christian Church); Kingmi (Gereja Kemah Injil, or Tabernacle Church); Gereja Injil di Indonesia (Evangelical Church in Indonesia); and Baptist—established the West Papua Council of Churches (WPCC) on 31 January 2020 as a separate umbrella from the existing ecumenical Council of Churches of Papua, which includes all Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. Members of the WPCC have since become members of the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC). In a YouTube message posted on 28 October, Rev Socrates Sofyan Yoman emphasized that “by joining PCC, they return to their original home, namely the Churches of Melanesia” (Suara Mambruk Papua 2020). He called the WPCC “a new home, a new honai for Papuans” that will provide protection. The question remains whether the new home will be

inclusive enough to cover all Christian denominations.

Within the Catholic community in Papua, there have been ongoing concerns over the silence of Papua's bishops regarding the protracted conflict. One of the Papuan priests who signed the moral appeal acknowledged that it was difficult for him to have a dialogue with the bishop of Jayapura to discuss the priests' statement. “But we receive support from the Bishops of Agats and Sorong,” he said. This internal problem has become a public issue since it directly contributes to the divisions among the Papuan churches. Unlike in the 1990s and 2000s, the churches are no longer united in one front to advocate for social justice and human rights for Papuans. This may undermine not only their effectiveness but, more importantly, the call for justice for Papuans.

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## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The year 2020 brought great challenges worldwide with the global pandemic of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), and while many parts of the Pacific region were able to remain free of the virus and its variants, Papua New Guinea (PNG) was not able to stay the tide. Coupled with this threat were government efforts to deal with a stumbling economy, breakdowns in negotiations regarding the distribution of profits from extractive industries, and grave political infighting. Faced with such stern challenges, the country was able to navigate a path through, even passing two important anti-corruption laws, although it certainly was not unscathed.

The COVID-19 pandemic heavily disrupted an already strained health-care system in PNG. The structure and capacity of health-care provision in both rural and urban parts of PNG have always been tenuous, with major challenges in procuring needed supplies, medicines, and trained staff. These common shortcomings combined with the added stress of a pandemic turned out to be a recipe for disaster for a country that already struggles to address tuberculosis, polio, malaria, and other maladies within its borders. While the doc-

tors and nurses administering aid during the pandemic have shown great resilience, even as they often become infected themselves, Papua New Guinea seems to have escaped the brunt of the virus's wrath along with much of the Global South. Complicating matters of tending to the sick, the administration of prevention measures, testing, restrictions, and so forth were handled by the Police Commission rather than the Ministry of Health. Authority wielded by the Ministry of Police, then headed by MP Bryan Kramer and Police Commissioner David Manning, allowed for restrictions such as lockdowns—especially within the larger cities—but police power lacks expertise in health-care delivery, the nuances of disease management, and complicated cooperation with international agencies like the World Health Organization (Ivarature, Thomson, and McClure 2020). Attempts to minimize disease spread were broad and heavy at first but eventually diminished to mere recommendations as time wore on, the economy faltered, and caseloads turned out to be lighter than in other countries.

Early restrictions came in February as potential outbreaks among Torres Strait Island communities on both sides of the marine boundary between PNG and Australia led to the border's closure, a precaution implemented to slow the potential spread of the disease by Islanders who are allowed free travel across the border based on traditional trading and lineage (Smith 2020). The first confirmed case of COVID-19, found in a male mine worker from overseas on 13 March, prompted a rapid response from the

government that ensured the return of the individual to his place of origin as well as the declaration of a fourteen-day state of emergency. The temporary order closed the country to international travel while also heavily restricting travel between provinces (Lyons 2020). One Qantas flight from Brisbane to Port Moresby learned about the strict enforcement of the border closure the hard way: they were informed mid-flight that they would not be allowed to land in the nation's capital because their scheduled arrival came the week after the order had been implemented (NBC News PNG 2020). Such decisive and sweeping action proved to be the exception to the rule as economic strains and pandemic fatigue made long-term restrictions difficult to maintain.

Papua New Guinea was not spared from the disastrous economic effects of the pandemic, with lockdowns affecting both domestic and international trade. Initial concerns that there would not be sufficient funds in government coffers to pay for protective equipment for medical staff prompted as many as four thousand nurses to strike in March. Said one anonymous doctor involved in the effort: "The national government must come clean on the financial front and tell the people whether there is money available to fight the coronavirus or not, because currently almost all hospitals lack basic medical supplies to attend to ordinary illnesses in the country" (Togiba 2020a). Shop and market closures were hard on local populations that are often unable to purchase or store large amounts of food to carry through the duration of an extended lockdown, and physical

distancing in some urban settlement communities can also be challenging. Businesses of all sizes felt the strains of lockdowns or other forced closures, and the mining industry was no exception. A single worker infected at least seven other employees at the Ok Tedi mine site, causing the entire mining operation to pause production for two weeks to conduct contact tracing and avert further spread (Doherty 2020a). The total cost in profits is unknown.

In October, the government took one of the more proactive and risky measures to curb the spread of the disease. It was also the most controversial. Leaked documents showed a payment of “10.2m Kina (US\$2.85m) being awarded to Niugini BioMed Ltd for research into discovering a new treatment for COVID-19 infections from existing drugs” (Kuku 2020). The decision was defended by the prime minister, who said that “there was nothing ‘illegal or improper’ about the Government’s engagement” with the previously unknown firm, which was only registered in mid-August and boasted several members of the University of Papua New Guinea’s science community in its employ. The firm promised new therapeutic results, stating that they were “‘highly confident’ it had discovered a new treatment for COVID-19 after ‘scanning and analysing’ 30,000 drugs from around the world” (Harriman and Kora 2020). While the company had made a presentation to the prime minister, many other parliamentary leaders were unaware of the decision, including the minister of health. Many other leaders and experts voiced their doubts and concerns, including the country’s top virologist, Dr Peter Siba,

who said, “I don’t see any expertise, any credible people in there that are knowledgeable about viruses” (Harriman and Kora 2020). The hopeful decision by the government to seek its own cure independent of international efforts by larger research institutions and drug companies was also mocked widely across social media.

Restrictions following the initial state of emergency fluctuated according to need until such efforts were quickly dropped in the latter part of the year. In April, a ban on liquor, public gatherings, and public transport and a general curfew from 8 PM to 6 AM was instituted by State of Emergency Controller David Manning for the National Capital District (NCD) and Central and Western Provinces after several case clusters were identified in those areas. Several cases were also reported among government pandemic response offices; even Prime Minister James Marape underwent testing, as he too was exposed, although his results returned negative (Sorariba 2020). While some charter flights carrying mine employees and other workers were still allowed to enter the country, a flight bringing some 180 Chinese workers was barred from entering after it was revealed that the passengers had received an experimental vaccine while still in China. Concerns over the vaccine’s unknown efficacy were amplified when it was revealed that forty-eight employees at the Ramu Nickel mine had been vaccinated with the same serum on site (Butler 2020), prompting Manning to request clarification from the Chinese embassy since his department had not authorized any trials (CBS News 2020). News reports detailing the

nationality of the mine workers who received the experimental treatment were conflicting, with some claiming they were Chinese citizens and others stating that they were local Papua New Guineans.

The economic toll led lockdown efforts to be curtailed by August, with Prime Minister Marape stating that “we have to adapt to living with COVID-19 for this year instead of taking on drastic measures” (Whiting 2020a). The move to abandon restrictions on movement and trading hours was supported by NCD Governor Powes Parkop, who calculated that “the consequence of economic meltdown, either in Port Moresby or the whole country, would be more devastating than what COVID will ever threaten us [with]” (Whiting 2020a). Efforts to encourage regular hand-washing with soap, limiting travel, physical distancing, and mask wearing have continued, while border regulations, including more consistent patrols on the land border with Indonesia’s colony of West Papua and limiting and tracking foreign arrivals by air, have continued. Through the end of 2020, those arriving from overseas were still required to isolate in a state-approved hotel for fourteen days, and some noncitizens, especially those employed by mines and arriving on charter flights, were to be fitted with ankle monitors to ensure compliance (Doherty 2020b).

Testing for the COVID-19 virus, usually seen as a key measure to prevent community spread, was very limited and never seemed to be a high priority for leadership, whose efforts to contain the virus appeared to be more reactive than proactive. Stigma

and fear attached to those who were diagnosed with the disease within the country also discouraged individuals from getting tested, even when testing was available. Most testing was done in large health clinics in towns, making data for spread in rural communities difficult to extrapolate, except in cases in which unwell individuals went to town for treatment. These factors made tracking the spread of the virus difficult and gave experts only enough information to offer best guesses as to how and when it was entering the country. People crossing the border between the Indonesian province of Papua, where large outbreaks were recorded, into PNG’s Western and West Sepik Provinces prompted the deployment of additional security personnel to those areas. Nearly half of a spending bill of A\$112.66 million (280 million kina, or approximately US\$79,872,000) passed in May was dedicated to strengthening border security and included the construction of ten new border posts along the north-south border, while the “Australian Government, amongst other forms of assistance, provided a number of drones for surveillance and monitoring” (Ivarature 2020). Like much of the Global South, PNG has so far avoided a devastating outbreak (see Mukherjee 2021), but with case counts slowly climbing, increasing infections among health care workers, and the possibility that it will take at least two years before the outbreak is under control (Ivarature 2020), the health situation appears delicate for the foreseeable future.

Heavy economic dependence on natural resource extractive industries has dominated PNG policy since

independence, with many citizens and observers noting that benefits have not been as promised and are often outweighed by impacts. Bal Kama noted that previous governments' efforts to become "investor-friendly" had led them to make "hasty concessions that often disadvantaged the country from having a fair share of the revenue from the development of their resources" (2020). It now appears that efforts are underway to change this sentiment, as Prime Minister Marape looks to turn the campaign slogan "Take Back PNG" into policy decisions aimed at making more in profits, especially from the mining and petroleum sectors. These efforts included the quashing of a major memorandum of understanding, walking away from talks with Exxon Mobil, and the non-renewal of the mining lease, causing the closure of the Porgera mine.

Prime Minister Marape first tried to make good on campaign promises to get more out of extraction projects by canceling a memorandum of understanding laid out by his predecessor Peter O'Neill to develop a new mine. Agreements between the PNG government and Harmony and New Crest mining companies to develop the Wafi-Golpu mine were first established in late 2018, but Prime Minister Marape cited the preliminary agreement at that time as having been "signed outside of the normal protocols of government" (Patjole 2020). The quashing of the memorandum of understanding did not destroy the project entirely but rather set the stage for renegotiation.

The theme of renegotiation presented itself again when relations with international giant Exxon Mobil

soured, with discussions regarding the development of the P'nyang gas project abruptly canceled by government in late January. The development is a part of a US\$13 billion project that would see gas exports double by 2024 (Reuters 2020). The Marape government had been trying to negotiate a larger share of profits, with the prime minister telling a radio show audience that they had gone down to a bid of 65 percent but felt disrespected because "we came down and they never went up" (Moses 2020). Corporate representatives stated that the attempt would have created "uneconomical" conditions for the companies, leading Marape to double down on his criticism, saying that "to date my families, my tribes and my provinces and country are yet to fully see those promised windfalls yet the state continues to foot the social cost of this project" (Thornhill 2020b).

The Porgera Mine in Enga Province, located in the country's mountainous interior, accounts for approximately 10 percent of PNG's overall exports. In May, the government's sudden decision not to renew the special mining lease took everyone by surprise, including mine operator Barrick Gold and partner Zijin Mining. The shocking announcement did not go unprotested, with the international mining giant "saying the move was 'tantamount to nationalisation without due process'" (Pryke and McLeod 2020). Marape resisted the claim, insisting that he was simply trying to secure a better deal for the people and that "the government had only exercised its rights under PNG law to reclaim the lease after 30 years and that all assets at the site remained

Barrick's" (Thornhill 2020a). With a goal to secure a larger share of profits from extractive projects in general, and some 20 percent more from Porgera (Thornhill 2020a), the Marape-led government is actively seeking to rewrite the rules for doing business in PNG and securing what they see to be similar arrangements to those in other countries. Such tactics have yet to pay off and risk scaring away investors who already view PNG as a high-risk location. This does not mean that all development projects are off the table, as at least two memorandums of understanding were signed for investigation into the creation of other projects.

While projects that grow from initial memorandums of understanding rarely turn into substantive operations, they are often used by elected officials and companies to signal intent and to report observable results to electorates and overseers, respectively (Faa 2020). One such agreement came in September when the government and Fortescue Metals Group signed an agreement to analyze the possibility of a hydroelectric power plant along the Purari River (Thompson 2020). A second arrangement made headlines, especially in Australia, in November when the Fujian Zhonghong Fishery Company and the PNG government made a "detail-thin" pact that could allow for the building of a US\$204 million fish processing plant on Daru Island in Western Province (Citowicki 2020). Part of China's greater Belt and Road Initiative (Faa 2020), the potential for a fleet of Chinese-flagged vessels to have a major port within miles of Australian claims in the Torres Strait caused alarm in both media

broadcasts and government corridors throughout Australia. Commentators and politicians raised concerns over territorial incursions and environmental exploitation. Xue Bing, China's ambassador to PNG, responded to the sudden barrage of criticism, which included a request for clarification from Canberra (Lea 2020), by stating that "the relevant reports by certain Australian media and institutions lack basic facts, are full of lies and authors' conjecture, and intend to disrupt and undermine practical cooperation between China and PNG" (Blades 2020).

With attention focused on projects being scheduled and canceled, little has been said officially in regard to the human and environmental aspects connected to the fisheries, mining, and gas industries. Issues such as human rights violations by mining companies and their security forces, equitable treatment of landowners, sustainable development alternatives, and environmental degradation have not seriously been broached by PNG leadership recently. These concerns should also remain top priorities going forward, especially as the PNG government has continued to actively support the development of a mine on the Frieda River, a tributary to the Sepik River. The development has been largely unpopular among the local population, with numerous protests, especially in the country's northern provinces, and has also garnered criticism from the United Nations special rapporteurs, who say that the project "appears to disregard the human rights of those affected" (Togiba 2020b).

Two major pieces of legislation



designed to fight corruption became law in 2020. Corruption in both government and the private sector is often seen to be simply part of the landscape of living and doing business in PNG, and little has been done to combat improprieties since the government watchdog Taskforce Sweep was disbanded by then Prime Minister Peter O’Neil in 2014. The Whistleblower Act passed into law in February with a vote of 90–0. It guarantees protection for employees working in the private sector against retaliation for reporting perceived corruption. Davis Steven, at that time serving as deputy prime minister, minister for justice, and attorney-general, noted that the new legislation acted as “a conduit for employees that note suspicious improprieties to make protected disclosure in accordance with relevant disclosure channels” (Tarawa 2020). In November, an Organic Act to establish an Independent Commission Against Corruption also became law, with no parliamentary representatives voting to oppose (96–0) (Whiting 2020c). The move was welcomed by members of Parliament, the anti-corruption organization Transparency International, as well as ordinary citizens, many of whom voiced their approval via social media. The commission will have significant power to investigate allegations of corruption in both the public and private sectors and includes acts committed overseas. It will operate with broad definitions with the intent to “seek to impose liability beyond primary actors to those who may be thought of as aiders or abettors (before and after the fact) and conspirators” (Nicolson and others 2020). The unopposed passage of both acts gives hope that

leadership in the country is taking corruption seriously; however, questions remain about longevity of funding (Whiting 2020c) and the efficacy and integrity of those who work for the commission.

Political parties in PNG have existed since independence; however, they are generally not based on policy or political ideology but rather are blocs formed to negotiate and secure power for members of Parliament. The volatile nature of party politics was again seen in the latter portion of 2020 as the leadership of Prime Minister Marape was challenged in Parliament. Though he eventually thwarted the attempt to replace him in the seat of leadership, the ordeal was not without intrigue, as several members crossed from Government to Opposition and then back again. This began in November when a large number of members of Parliament, including nine cabinet ministers (Mou 2020a), left Government to join ranks with Vanimō MP Belden Namah in the Opposition. Those crossing the floor included political veteran and recently appointed Deputy Prime Minister Sam Basil, as well as Patrick Pruaitch and Davis Steven, foreign affairs minister and attorney-general, respectively. Namah claimed to have the support of 61 of the 111 members of Parliament, a sure majority, but procedural formalities delayed the tabling of a vote of no confidence (Whiting 2020b). The massive shift allowed the Opposition to pass a motion to suspend Parliament until the beginning of December in order to prepare for a vote of no confidence, as well as to block the passage of the next year’s budget (Kuku and Doherty 2020), a

standard procedure in the month of November. The parliamentary intrigue led Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to cancel his planned trip to Port Moresby (Whiting, Dalzell, and Dziedzic, 2020). It also brought out fiery responses unlike any seen before from Marape, who stated: “I am a Huli chief responsible for the small people’s dreams to be rich in their God-given rich land and waters throughout the length and breadth of my country. . . . A Huli doesn’t surrender in a fight, you have to kill me on the battlefield and I will die with dignity. I would rather die in battle for the values I stand for.” He then labeled his detractors “political scumbags” (Jackson 2020).

Opposition members looked to spend the time of the adjournment in Vanimo and were therefore unavailable when Speaker Job Pomat declared that the adjournment of Parliament had been “wrongly entertained” and convened a special sitting in order to consider the 2021 budget, which only fifty-seven members attended (APR Editor 2020). The validity of that sitting was subsequently challenged by O’Neill, the former prime minister who has since become a leader in the Opposition camp, and overturned by the Supreme Court, thus delegitimizing the budget that was passed in the lightning session (Wall 2020). Eventually, the Opposition nominated Pruaitch as alternative prime minister. Pruaitch declined Marape’s challenge to a public televised debate (Elapa 2020), and he eventually lost support of his own faction, essentially dissolving the attempt to unseat the prime minister, as some seventeen of the same Parliament members who

had previously abandoned Marape’s side of the house, including Sam Basil, returned across the chamber. Members of Parliament then sat down and passed the same budget that had been previously invalidated (Mou 2020b). It appears likely that the selection of Pruaitch instead of Basil for alternative prime minister resulted in the latter’s return to the government benches, sinking the Opposition’s efforts to install new leadership (McLeod and Pryke 2020).

Throughout the whirlwind of leadership challenges in Parliament, the Supreme Court stood strong and demonstrated its independence and non-partisanship. Forced to make several rulings throughout the short season of political turmoil that was November and December, the court demonstrated that “despite a political system that is fractured, PNG has a robust, independent and highly competent national judiciary that ensures the constitution is not breached by prime ministers, governments and parliaments” (Wall 2020).

The year 2020 saw PNG leadership forced to navigate tumultuous challenges. National leadership came out with stronger mechanisms against corruption and an increased will to obtain larger profits from its own resources. Given the political infighting, a deficit of US\$1.9 billion in the 2021 budget, decreased revenues from boarded-up mining projects (Green 2020), negotiations for Bougainville’s independence, a growing COVID-19 threat against an already overextended health-care system, and the need to fill several ministerial seats with individuals who are both competent and loyal, Prime Minister Marape and

the people of Papua New Guinea have a mountain of trials to scale throughout 2021.

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## SOLOMON ISLANDS

The year under review began with a positive diplomatic interaction when Australia's newly appointed high commissioner, Dr Lachlan Strahan, and New Zealand's high commissioner, Georgina Roberts, presented their credentials to Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on behalf of the Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement (DCGA). Erin Elizabeth McKee, the United States Ambassador to Solomon Islands, also presented her credentials to the governor general, Sir

David Vunagi (*Solomon Star* 2020e). These countries have provided development assistance to Solomon Islands in various sectors, including law and development. Australia in particular has been a significant donor following Solomon Islands' 1998–2002 civil unrest, investing in the law and justice sector and leading the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands to restore the rule of law and strengthen government machinery.

Prime Minister Sogavare “described Australia as a ‘true friend’ who has stood beside Solomon Islands in its darkest hour. . . . [It] occupies a strategic position and plays a strategic role in our regional joint efforts to ensure that our region continues to enjoy peace and stability” (*Solomon Star* 2020a). He made this statement when launching a fundraising drive to assist Australia due to the destruction caused by a bushfire that started in September 2019 (*Solomon Star* 2020a). As a show of this friendship, the Solomon Islands government endorsed S1\$800,000 (approximately US\$100,000) as part of the drive, and the organizing committee received cash donations from church organizations, nongovernmental organizations, private entities, and individuals, raising a total of S1\$1,158,289.80, which was handed over as a check to High Commissioner Strahan (SIG 2020b).

Nevertheless, the year took a new twist after the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic on 11 March (Ducharme 2020). Governor General Sir David Vunagi, acting on government advice, used his powers under section 16(2) of the constitution to declare a state of public emergency.

Such a declaration was justified given that the threat of COVID-19, which was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, was a matter of national security. The state of public emergency activated the Emergency Powers Act, which authorized the governor general to enact the Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations 2020. The orders under these regulations gave the prime minister the power to restrict the movement of people, vessels, and aircraft; restrict assembly; suspend the media; and declare a public place an emergency zone. Although such restrictions could be perceived as infringing on freedom of movement, it was assumed that they would not be interpreted as such because they were “reasonably justifiable” to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Foukona 2020).

The government stopped international flights, shut down maritime borders, and encouraged people residing in Honiara to return to their island provinces as an immediate COVID-19 emergency response to prevent disease spread. It then transferred S\$250,000 to each member of Parliament to facilitate constituents’ repatriation from Honiara to their rural home villages (Ride and Kekea 2020). The repatriation exercise was commendable because it allowed people to go back to their villages, which were considered places of protection, security, and resilience. However, it also resulted in the death of twenty-seven people before any COVID-19 cases were reported in Solomon Islands. The twenty-seven victims had washed overboard from the *MV Taimareho*, which had left Honiara on 2 April, due to rough seas from a develop-

ing tropical cyclone. The MP for the West ‘Are‘are constituency in Malaita Province had chartered the ferry using government funds (Perry 2020).

In addition to the national emergency measures, the Honiara City Council issued a notice requesting that roadside market vendors in the city voluntarily close their informal markets (Kekea 2020c). Also, the Solomon Islands National Provident Fund, with approval from its board, allowed its members affected by the impacts of COVID-19 to withdraw their savings either partially or in full, depending on each member’s circumstances. The maximum amount a member could withdraw was S\$5,000 (SIPNF 2020).

While the borders were closed throughout 2020, logging and cargo vessels were allowed to enter the country’s maritime borders, but they had to comply with quarantine requirements. Solomon Airlines repatriation flights continued, with strict quarantine protocols in place, allowing citizens as well as approved noncitizens to travel to Honiara. Apart from direct repatriation flights from Australia, Fiji, and Vanuatu, the government further approved an exceptional chartered Solomon Airlines flight to and from Guangzhou, China, as well as a flight to and from the Philippines (RNZ 2020a). The China flight, and to a lesser extent the Philippines flight, attracted widespread criticism from nongovernmental organizations, local politicians, and the general public because of fears that COVID-19 could be imported into the country. The government did not listen, instead stating that “the decision to continue with the flights was made after careful consideration of the Covid-19 statuses of

both countries and the risks involved” (RNZ 2020a).

The Opposition Group and Transparency Solomon Islands described the government’s decision “to organise a flight to China as unacceptable and a show of arrogance by the government. . . . DCGA is dancing to China’s tune on this planned trip” (*Solomon Star* 2020b). Daniel Suidani, the premier of Malaita province, expressed that “the nation’s leaders were putting their new relationship with Beijing before their own people” (Hollingsworth 2020). As a result, he called for a referendum a few days before the Guangzhou flight to ascertain whether Malaitans were “still willing to be part of a country (whose) leadership is becoming dictatorial” (Hollingsworth 2020). The DCGA government’s immediate response was to declare that Suidani’s call for a referendum on Malaita independence was illegal. However, Suidani explained that the referendum proposal was about gathering Malaitans’ opinions on the question of political autonomy. He stated that his provincial government believes the Solomon Islands Constitution protects such expressions of opinion (*Island Sun* 2020).

The referendum idea is not new. It has been associated with autonomy and federal system proposals pursued by other provinces numerous times since 1978. Hence, Malaita’s proposal to pursue a referendum appears to be reinforcing this trend. Rather than create an opposition against the ruling national government to trigger political instability, it would instead generate a policy discussion on political autonomy. However, as a result of the Malaita provincial government’s pol-

icy position, which did not align with the national government’s responses and actions, it was perceived as working against the national government. Thus, there were allegations that some national government MPs, mainly from Malaita, worked with some provincial members to remove Suidani’s government through a planned motion of no confidence (GCU 2020c). Although the national government denied these allegations, some provincial MPs called for a motion of no confidence against Suidani’s government in October, but this was defeated (RNZ 2020c). There was evidence of attempts to bribe some of the Malaita provincial MPs, but they refused the money and remained with the Suidani government (Waikori 2020).

The approved Guangzhou flight was considered necessary because it would bring in workers to help prepare Solomon Islands for the Pacific Games in 2023 (Mackay 2020). The DCGA is committed to hosting the games as planned despite views by groups such as Transparency Solomon Islands that “hosting a sporting event should not be a priority in the middle of a global pandemic” (Wylie 2020). A total of 104 passengers were on the Guangzhou flight to Honiara on 2 September, including Chinese workers, government officials such as ambassador Li Ming, and twenty-one Solomon Islands nationals (Jie and Lanlan 2020). All passengers went through a fourteen-day quarantine, were tested for COVID-19 and received negative results, and were subsequently released from the quarantine centers. This was followed by the opening of China’s embassy in Honiara on 21 September, a year after Solomon Islands changed



diplomatic ties from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Xinhua Net 2020). Solomon Islands and China then moved to officially sign an "agreement to build 2023 Pacific Games venues" (Mackay 2020).

Following the Guangzhou flight was the Philippines flight, which brought home Solomon Islands students and led to Solomon Islands losing its COVID-19-free status in early October when one of the students tested positive (CNN 2020).

There were several controversial government responses following the state of public emergency declaration. One example was the termination of Dr Claude Posala, head of the Department of Ophthalmology and president of the Solomon Islands Medical Association (SIMA). Posala had been very outspoken about government service delivery and how it addressed issues raised by SIMA. The government, through the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, alleged that Posala's statements violated Regulation 26, which stipulates that a public officer can be terminated for publishing statements or information in the media that is contrary to the COVID-19 information published by the government or that is inflammatory and incites hatred against the government. He was terminated by the public service for "criticising government actions under the COVID-19 state of public emergency" (Civicus 2020).

Members of the public, the Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions, and the leader of the opposition, Hon Matthew Wale, responded by calling the government to reinstate Posala. Wale also asked the government "to

review Regulation 26 of the State of Public Emergency orders so that senior health officials were exempt from the media gag" (Civicus 2020). The government's action was perceived by the general public as politically motivated. It is questionable whether the decision to terminate Posala was reasonably justifiable and aligned with the purpose of the state of public emergency, which was about preventing the spread of COVID-19.

The emergency orders were also used to discourage rumors and political dissent. For instance, the police arrested and charged an Indigenous male citizen for posting on his Facebook page about Solomon Islands having COVID-19 (Civicus 2020). The police alleged that the accused's action constituted the spreading of a rumor, thereby violating section 63 of the Penal Code. The case was thrown out of court due to insufficient evidence (Buchanan 2020). The minister of provincial government and institutional strengthening threatened to suspend the outspoken premier of Malaita Province and his executive government, accusing Suidani of going overseas without his approval and "willfully disobeying a directive to attend a Covid-19 strategy meeting in the capital Honiara" (RNZ 2020d). He stated that "these actions, as well as previous and ongoing breaches of protocol, contradicted the role of a provincial administration as an agent of the state" (RNZ 2020d). On this basis, the minister indicated he might recommend the prime minister to use his powers under the Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations to suspend the Malaita provincial government.

Although reasons were given for the Malaita provincial government's potential suspension, they were perceived as politically motivated. The premier of Malaita Province "has been one of the loudest critics of the national government's decision to cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of China," and he has questioned some of its COVID-19 responses (RNZ 2020d). However, consistent with the constitutional framework, Malaita Province actively engages in a policy opposition expressed within the formal governance structure, and this should not be conflated with an opposition against the national government. Wale, the parliamentary leader of the opposition, responded to the DCGA's intention to suspend Malaita Province by expressing that such a decision would incite social disharmony when the country should be focusing on fighting COVID-19. He stated that "any move against the premier was especially risky when the grounds for the suspension appeared to be a selective enforcement of the law" (RNZ 2020d).

The DCGA responded, claiming that Wale's comments were inciting lawlessness, thus breaching emergency measures and warranting a police investigation (Civicus 2020). Wale described the government's statement as a "knee-jerk reaction" and warned that the "Prime Minister, government and officials must not abuse the state of emergency and the consequential regulations for political reasons" (RNZ 2020g). The government seemed to draw on the state of public emergency orders to curb any comments or responses that questioned or did not align with its actions or decisions

regarding its handling of public health during the pandemic.

COVID-19 diplomacy through donor assistance was evident throughout 2020. One form of COVID-19 donor assistance was the donation of personal protective equipment and other much-needed supplies, with "such donations account[ing] for almost all of China's assistance" (Poling and Natalegawa 2020). For example, the Solomon Islands government received US\$300,000 from the People's Republic of China, and some of these funds were used to purchase COVID-19 kits and lab equipment, including a quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) machine from the Chinese company BGI (Beijing Genomic Institution). When these kits and equipment arrived at the Henderson airport in Honiara, there was a photo ceremony involving Solomon Islands government ministers and officials and Chinese diplomatic officials to welcome the cargo (Kekea 2020a).

The Chinese embassy in Honiara also donated two thousand disposable protective masks to Makira Province (*Solomon Star* 2020c) and another twenty-five hundred to Western Province (Osifelo 2020). The donations involved presentation ceremonies by the People's Republic of China in the presence of Solomon Islands government officials and politicians as a strategy for promoting PRC COVID-19 assistance. Despite public knowledge that the Malaita provincial government has a strong position against associating with the PRC government and its agents, the People's Republic of China's acting ambassador to Solomon Islands, Yao Ming, "made a special trip to Malaita at the invita-

tion of two MPs” from Baegu/Asifola and Fataleka constituencies (Fanasia 2020).

While the People’s Republic of China used COVID-19 assistance to continue to exert its diplomatic influence, Malaita Province sought and received assistance from the Republic of China, which provided COVID-19 food support by funding the purchase of 2,600 twenty-kilogram bags of rice (Saeni 2020b). It also donated personal protective equipment and COVID-19 equipment, though these were initially confiscated by the police based on the attorney general’s advice that there might be a possible breach of the Sedition Act. The premier of Malaita thanked the “government and loving people of Taiwan for the support” (Saeni 2020b). The DCGA condemned both the premier’s action and his statement acknowledging the Republic of China’s COVID-19 assistance. China’s embassy spokesperson in Honiara protested in the media, expressing that the “One-China principle should be honored in a strict manner by Solomon Islands national as well as provincial governments” (*Sunday Isles* 2020). The chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, MP Peter Kenilorea Jr, pointed out that this statement “was inappropriate and failed to comply with international protocols and diplomacy” (Saeni 2020c). Following Kenilorea, it could be argued that such a statement was a breach of diplomatic protocols in that it spoke directly to subnational units and therefore impinged on the sovereignty of Solomon Islands.

The second form of COVID-19 assistance was cash donations, including long-term aid investment to strengthen

public health-care systems and support economic recovery (Poling and Natalegawa 2020). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) “provided \$US7.8 million (\$US4.8 million in grants and a \$US3 million concessional loan) in April . . . to help the Solomon’s health sector respond to Covid-19” (RNZ 2020f). Late in July, it provided a further US\$20 million in the form of a grant and a concessional loan to the Solomon Islands government for training “nurses and doctors to fight Covid-19, and to obtain personal protective equipment . . . for medical staff,” as well as to “help finance the government’s economic stimulus for individuals and businesses” (RNZ 2020f). As part of its aid program, the Australian government focused on a COVID-19 response program, disbursing A\$13 million (approximately US\$10 million) to Solomon Islands (Cornish 2020) and deploying health experts to provide “guidance on stimulus packages and other economic measures designed to offset the impacts of the pandemic” (Poling and Natalegawa 2020). Funding assistance from Australia was used to procure “new ventilators as part of ongoing support towards the Solomon Island’s efforts against COVID-19” (UNOCHA 2020).

In mid-March, New Zealand approved an initial COVID-19 response package that would assist twelve Pacific countries, including Solomon Islands, by focusing on two key goals: “to support health preparedness by providing critical equipment to bolster Pacific countries’ existing health systems” and “to build economic preparedness through financial contributions towards Pacific governments’ emerging economic response

initiatives” (Kings 2020). As part of this package, New Zealand provided “cash assistance to Covid-19 recovery and general budget support for Tonga and the Solomon Islands” (Poling and Natalegawa 2020). The aid assistance was directed to the central government and its line ministries in Honiara, with the expectation that its benefits would flow to the provinces.

According to the Central Bank of Solomon Islands, “the country’s economy is already heading into a recession with GDP growth for 2020 forecast to further decline to minus 4.9 percent” (RNZ 2020b). The DCGA government launched the Development Bank of Solomon Islands as part of its “commitment to grow [the] national economy” (Vula 2020). It also introduced the Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) as a measure to ensure fiscal stability and “to counter negative growth within the domestic economy while also safeguarding the basic needs and livelihood of the general population” (Kekea 2020b). The package was divided into five areas: “Soft Measures (dealing with the crisis); Immediate Recovery 1 (investing in productive and resource sectors); Immediate Recovery 2 (equity injection into public and public/private companies); Medium Term Support (Focus on support to stimulate and build the capacity of the economy to develop and grow); [and] Medium to Long-term Measures (donor funded development projects)” (RNZ 2020b). While this plan to boost the economy looks good, at least on paper, how the funding arrangements will be administered and distributed remains a challenge.

Funding for the ESP was “sourced

through government bonds and overseas concessional loans as well as direct budgetary support from donors” (RNZ 2020b), totaling S\$319 million (US\$40 million), or the equivalent of 2.6 percent of the country’s GDP (UNESCAP 2021). A team under the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet conducted a public-awareness campaign about the ESP throughout the country, and they encouraged people to apply using the correct forms since there were reports of opportunists going around and selling fake forms to farmers and fishermen (GCU 2020a). A committee chaired by the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Finance and comprising government officials and related agencies was responsible for reviewing ESP applications, deciding on recipients and allocations, and facilitating the disbursement of funds (Kekea 2020b). Interestingly, members of Parliament were among the first ESP recipients allocated S\$600,000 (US\$75,200) (Iroga 2020).

In October, the United States government, under the Trump administration, “announced new funding investments of US\$200 million for the Indo Pacific as part of its Pacific Pledge. Under this umbrella of support to the Region is a US\$25 million support package” (GCU 2020b). This United States Aid (USAID) funding is for the “Strengthening Competitiveness, Agriculture, Livelihoods and Environment (SCALE) Program focusing on Malaita Province in Solomon Islands” (Nolan 2020). It appears that the United States favored Malaita Province because of its strong opposition to “PRC communist ideology and investment” and pro-Taiwan support

(Saeni 2020a; McDonald 2020). The Malaita provincial government was thankful for the US government's bold move to engage with Malaita despite perceptions that it is a problematic province to develop (*Solomon Star* 2020d).

The national government welcomed such aid assistance but noted that rollout steps and documents would need to "go through the appropriate Solomon Islands Government channels for Aid Delivery as per the National Aid Management and Development Cooperation Policy" (GCU 2020b). Some political scientists reacted by saying that the USAID assistance has "got a lot to do with geopolitics" (Wasuka 2020b). This is not surprising given Malaita Province's anti-China and pro-Taiwan stance. Interestingly, the USAID assistance is unprecedented because the funding is administered by Winrock, a US nonprofit organization that maintains its presence in Malaita Province rather than following the business-as-usual development aid approach of engaging with the central government in Honiara, where "bureaucrats and foreign consultants gatekeep [capital aid] flows and capture much of the benefit" (Meti 2020).

In November, it was alleged in the media that New Zealand COVID-19 funds that were supposedly meant for the upgrading of Gizo hospital facilities in Western Province and Kiluufi hospital facilities in Malaita Province had been diverted. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services denied the allegation and explained how the government had used the funds (MHMS 2020). There were also allegations of corruption and mismanagement of the Economic Stimulus

Package, with Transparency Solomon Islands calling for an immediate audit of the ESP funds after a "leaked list of recipients included public officials and people without legitimate businesses or projects" (RNZ 2020e). The permanent secretary of the Ministry of Finance, McKinnie Dentana, rejected these allegations, describing them as defamatory and misleading because the people Transparency Solomon Islands referred to were not recipients but rather public officers who were imprest holders "entrusted with facilitating payments for youths hired on a casual basis to monitor price control regulation in the country" (RNZ 2020e). Wale described Dentana's statement as evasive and suggested that Dentana should inform the public when the accurate list would be published (Opposition Press 2020). In response, the Ministry of Finance created an ESP website, which provided an outline of the package and information on the approved recipient list (SIG 2020a). Despite the website's creation, people continue to raise concerns over corruption issues and the mismanagement of public funds because of discrepancies in recipient names and questionable allocation and disbursement of funds.

Following the expiration of the state of public emergency on 24 November, the government extended it for another four months (GCU 2020d). The government also proposed banning Facebook because of ongoing criticism and hate comments about how the government was handling public funds and the delivery of services. Prime Minister Sogavare stated that the Facebook ban was aimed at stopping cyberbullying and online

defamation “in order to preserve national unity” (Wasuka 2020a), but the government later backed down on its proposal. Sogavare also announced the “Government’s 5 objectives under its redirection policy to sustain and grow an inclusive broad-based economy. This will be achieved through efficient management, utilization, and protection of the country’s natural resources” (OPMC 2020).

As the country moved into December, 821 people arrived in Honiara on repatriation flights operated by Solomon Airlines (Nuria 2021). There was also an announcement in December that the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s board of directors had “approved a US\$23 million (SBD\$185 million) Threshold Program for Solomon Islands” focusing on forest ecosystem conservation and tourism (*Solomon Star* 2020f). This seems to align with the redirection policy to guide the government’s efforts to improve the economy. In 2021, the government is expected to address economic concerns while continuing to protect its citizens from COVID-19.

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## TIMOR-LESTE

The year 2020 started badly for the government of Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak, whose annual national budget was defeated in January by his own alliance partner, Xanana Gusmão’s National Congress for

Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) (Leach 2020). The CNRT’s unprecedented move was in part an attempt to force an early election in response to the continuing refusal of President Francisco “Lú Olo” Guterres (a senior figure of the opposition Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, or Fretilin, party) to install several CNRT ministers, citing judicial inquiries into misconduct or “poor moral standing” (Colo 2020). This long-running standoff had resulted in an executive government dominated by ministers from the two smaller alliance parties, the Popular Liberation Party (PLP) and Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nacional Timor Oan (KHUNTO). Tensions over development decisions between the larger CNRT party and the prime minister’s PLP had also contributed to testy relations.

Despite making major revisions to the budget requested by the CNRT in late 2019, the budget vote was supported only by the PLP and KHUNTO, with thirteen votes (Lusa 2020b). The Fretilin opposition voted against the bill, while the CNRT abstained, effectively killing the budget. There was a clear element in these events of the CNRT flexing its parliamentary muscles to bring the smaller alliance parties into line.

The immediate consequence was the resumption of the reserve “duo-decimal” budget system—which meant the government operated on monthly instalments of one twelfth of the previous 2019 budget, with no funding for new programs. In the lead-up to the vote, Ruak pleaded with MPs not to force the country back into using the duodecimal system, which was widely blamed for the economic

contraction in 2017 and 2018, when the former Fretilin minority government failed to pass its budget. Timor-Leste's economy is highly dependent on government spending.

Though Ruak's administration continued as an interim government, the rejection of the budget made it clear that the governing alliance was at an end. In late February, Gusmão announced a new six-party, thirty-four-seat majority coalition. Alongside his CNRT (21 seats) were the Democratic Party (5 seats), KHUNTO (5 seats), and three smaller parties (1 seat each). The other main development was a publicly announced "platform of understanding" between Fretilin and the PLP, which together controlled 31 seats—two short of a majority.

Prime Minister Ruak resigned, but the president did not immediately accept this. At this point, there were two clear options for presidential action: a remodeled government drawn from within the existing Parliament or a new election.

The president, in no hurry to install the new alliance, required all six parties to the alliance to fulfill legal requirements for party conventions endorsing the coalition. In a clear sign of "cohabitation" tensions, Guterres also publicly advised the CNRT to "think twice" before proposing the same rejected ministers (*Tempo Timor* 2020). The political situation remained at this impasse as the threat of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) hit neighboring Indonesia hard, bringing clear risks to Timor-Leste.

Despite the political impasse, the interim government responded quickly and decisively. Following parliamen-

tary approval, the president issued a state-of-emergency decree from March to April, and the government introduced new measures prohibiting the entry of all foreigners unless specifically authorized and requiring fourteen days of self-isolation for all arrivals. These emergency measures would be renewed eight times across 2020.

Debates over the extension of the emergency decree would spell the end of Gusmão's new coalition, which fell apart over a CNRT decision to oppose the extension of the pandemic emergency decree (Sampaio 2020), with the youth-oriented KHUNTO party's five MPs voting to support the Ruak government against the wishes of the CNRT. The vote on the emergency decree, a crucial test of the alliance's solidity, was defeated 37–23, with four abstentions. Two days later, KHUNTO announced its formal exit from the new coalition, declaring it had "decided to give full support to the current constitutional government until the year 2023" (Lusa 2020a).

The dramatic vote was quickly followed by an invitation from Prime Minister Ruak for Fretilin and other members of Parliament to join the government, which was rapidly accepted. Ruak's government was then bolstered, with Fretilin ministers taking the key portfolios of health, state administration, finance, and tourism, commerce, and industry and the Democratic Party taking the former-combatants portfolio (Tatoli 2020). Thus, by May, with the assistance of President Guterres, the eighth government had effectively been remodeled, with Fretilin now allied with the PLP and KHUNTO and with the CNRT now

in opposition. Fretilin leader Mari Alkatiri indicated that there would be no formal parliamentary alliance but rather a guarantee of parliamentary support, with Fretilin ministers serving in a “technocratic” capacity. In any case, these developments brought the executive government and the parliamentary majority back into alignment, making the passage of the government’s COVID-19 measures easier to facilitate.

The CNRT remained highly critical of the president’s role, accusing President Guterres of advantaging the PLP and Fretilin. In May, nineteen CNRT MPs formally requested that the Court of Appeal review the constitutionality of several of the president’s actions, including his rejection of nominated CNRT ministers, his failure to accept Prime Minister Ruak’s initial resignation, and his failure to respond in a timely manner to the presentation of a new majority coalition. The Court of Appeal rejected this application—in effect, an impeachment case—without considering the substantive arguments on the basis that the action had not met the threshold requirement of support from two-thirds of MPs.

The outcome of the appeal was broadly consistent with international practice. In systems with directly elected presidents, a supermajority in the legislature is normally required to trigger judicial review of presidential actions. Emerging East Timorese constitutional jurisprudence appeared to be making it clear that the court would not step easily into the realm of executive political discretions—for which the president will ultimately be accountable to the people in 2022—or interfere in decisions based

on the democratic mandates of other branches of government.

Later the same month, as the new parliamentary majority sought to elect a new president of Parliament (akin to a Speaker) on 19 May, the chamber descended into chaos. The CNRT’s Arão Noé, still in the position, sought to delay the motion for his own removal. The new majority saw this as an abuse of process, and the deputy presidents sought to hold a vote, only to be physically prevented by a CNRT MP from taking the president’s chair (Pacific Media Watch 2020).

The following day, the president’s table was overturned and destroyed by CNRT MPs, who loudly chanted and protested throughout the session. An irregular vote organized by the deputy presidents without the CNRT’s participation removed Noé in a 36–0 decision, and a second irregular vote (supported by forty MPs, including four of the five Democratic Party members) then installed Fretilin’s Aniceto Guterres as the new parliamentary president. Many Timorese were shocked at the scenes, which made international news.

These votes were then challenged in court by the CNRT, which vowed not to return to Parliament before the ruling. The Court of Appeal’s decision rejected the CNRT’s application, declaring that the majority’s efforts to install a new parliamentary president were “political acts” that are not subject to judicial review and noting that the president’s position depended on the political confidence of a majority of MPs (Lusa 2020d). With similar officeholders in other countries relying on the confidence of their respective houses of representa-

tives, and with parliaments across the world commonly governing their own procedures, this decision seemed relatively unremarkable. While opinions were divided along party lines in Dili, the decision allowed the new majority supporting the government to exercise control of Parliament's agenda. This facilitated the passage of the 2020 budget, though this did not occur until 23 October. The budget for 2021 was approved on 12 December by the majority in the House, with the twenty-one CNRT MPs deciding not to attend the vote.

While these issues will continue to be hotly debated in Dili's political circles, what is beyond doubt is that Timor-Leste's first period of cohabitation—with the president and the prime minister coming from different parties—demonstrated the extent of presidential power in this semi-presidential system. It also underlined the fact that the president's direct mandate is not readily comparable with ceremonial heads of state in parliamentary systems. The wider conclusion is that many underestimated presidential power, and it is likely that presidential elections will be taken far more seriously by all political players in the future.

Reflecting these events, the CNRT formally withdrew its ministers from government on 25 May. Rising PLP star Fidelis Magalhaes took the position of minister for the presidency of the Council of Ministers—effectively a senior cabinet coordination role. KHUNTO's Berta dos Santos became the new deputy prime minister, the most senior position a woman has held since independence. She kept her previous portfolio of social solidar-

ity minister, in which she earned a reputation for being in touch with the concerns of rural Timorese.

On the economic front, the pandemic-induced downturn and the lack of a government budget prompted the World Bank to forecast a contraction of 6.8 percent or more for the national economy in 2020, compared with opening forecasts of 4.6 percent growth (World Bank 2020).

The pandemic also had a major impact on the current balance of Timor-Leste's petroleum fund in the first half of the year, a percentage of which was altered a few years ago to a higher risk, higher return profile. However, the fund bounced back by the end of the year through the accumulation of investment returns to a new peak of US\$19 billion.

More broadly, Timor-Leste's change of government also raised the issue of the long-term management of oil and gas wealth. Championed for so long by Gusmão, and the centerpiece of the National Strategic Development Plan, the Tasi Mane oil and gas processing megaproject on Timor's south coast was now under a cloud, with Gusmão in opposition. Political developments in 2020 thereby created a sense of policy limbo. The next election is not due until 2023, by which time Gusmão will be seventy-seven years old. In this period, the question of the new government's policies toward the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field looms large.

By most estimates, Timor-Leste's sovereign wealth petroleum fund will need to find new revenue by 2030 to support annual budgets of the size the nation has become accustomed to. On average, annual budgets have

been increasing by 11 percent per year. Despite the prospect of some increased revenue from Santos's lease in the existing Bayu-Undan fields in Timor-Leste's maritime zone (Offshore 2020), there is still no resolution to the key issue of developing the untapped Greater Sunrise oil and gas field.

As the nation faces an end to its ability to finance national budgets from its oil wealth within a decade, little progress has been made toward diversifying the economy. With existing petroleum funds good for perhaps ten years of annual budgets, a determined effort toward consensus building on sustainable economic policies is necessary to ensure Timor-Leste can weather declining income streams from its offshore oil and gas domains.

The remodeled government and its new executive have sent mixed messages to date. While Prime Minister Ruak reiterated his support for Tasi Mane (Ximenes 2020), other members of the executive branch, including the new petroleum minister, Vitor Soares, have emphasized the need for independent feasibility studies (McDonald 2020). The government has also replaced long-standing leaders of the National Petroleum and Minerals Authority and the national oil company, Timor GAP—figures who were instrumental to articulating the CNRT's visions for the industry.

While the Gusmão-led governments promised far larger revenue streams than would be received by downstream processing in Australia, the call for feasibility studies by the incoming minister has the backing of prominent nongovernmental organization La'ó Hamutuk, which has argued that the “risks, benefits and costs”

of downstream processing “have not been seriously analyzed” (2020b, 4). Illustrating the problem, the 2021 budget proposes to draw on the petroleum fund in excess of its sustainable income level by some US\$830 million (Lusa 2020c), a practice only viable for another ten years on current estimates.

Parliament's powerful public finance committee openly questioned the logic of some of the transfers to megaprojects in this year's budget, given the continuing issue with access to safe drinking water in some communities. La'ó Hamutuk has warned of insufficient spending on the government's stated priority areas of health, education, water, and agriculture, which together account for 18 percent of the 2021 budget (La'ó Hamutuk 2020a).

The change of government therefore raises a much larger issue for Timor-Leste as a whole. With the future of the Timorese economy at stake, and with the CNRT out of power for now, many would argue that it is time for a cross-party consensus on the management of the state's key untapped resource wealth—or at least an updated debate over the various options for development.

Despite the political ructions that dominated the first half of 2020, the government measures against COVID-19 proved extraordinarily effective, at least until early 2021. Aided by the fact that it receives fewer incoming visitors than most countries, Timor-Leste had only thirty-nine cases by end of 2020, all of which were returning Timorese or foreign arrivals and were effectively handled with quarantine. The government's Centro Integrado

de Gestão da Crise (Integrated Center for the Management of the Crisis), led by former prime minister and medical doctor Rui Maria de Araújo, was supported by new government economic measures to assist the population, including transfers to low-income families and electricity bill subsidies, with some three hundred thousand households receiving payments.

By the end of 2020, with the CNRT out of power, questions could be asked about the wisdom of the party's decision to reject the 2020 budget, a move that clearly backfired. The new coalition arrangements meant that, aside from a short-lived Fretilin minority government from 2017 to 2018, Gusmão was out of power for the first time since 2007. Behind the scenes, Fretilin leader Alkatiri had outplayed the old master in the latest round of their ongoing postindependence tussles. Never to be underestimated, Timor-Leste's third major historic leader, José Ramos-Horta, appeared to have informally aligned with Gusmão, a partnership that could see a return presidential bid by Ramos-Horta in 2022. Gusmão is now spending his time party building, something the CNRT, a classic "party of power" based on Gusmão's charismatic legitimacy, had neglected since its foundation in 2007. A lot of effort is being put into recruiting support in the powerful Catholic Church and building up district party structures, though the party still lacks a clear second line of leadership.

As 2020 ended, the major question was whether the giant of East Timorese politics, Gusmão, could come back from this position. Gusmão's move against his own Par-

liamentary Majority Alliance in January—probably part of a strategy to have the CNRT ministers installed and trigger an early election—appeared to have gone terribly wrong. That said, few would consider it wise to draft a political eulogy for the master politician just yet.

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## VANUATU

Events in Vanuatu in 2020 were dominated by the national general elections, natural disasters, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), and the controversies surrounding the fortieth independence anniversary celebrations.

A total of 231 candidates contested the national general elections for fifty-two seats in the twelfth legislature of Parliament (Malapa 2020a). On 19 March, over 278,000 voters cast their votes at 352 polling stations, where they saw a strong presence of observer groups representing both diplomatic missions and political parties (*Daily Post* 2020h). For the first time in the nation's history, the official counting of the ballots was streamed live on Facebook, which made the process both transparent and accessible



to viewing by third parties (Malapa 2020b).

Twenty-five former members of Parliament from the eleventh legislature were reelected, including Christophe Emelee (Torres constituency); Jay Ngwele (Ambae constituency); Bruno Leingkone (Ambrym constituency); Ian Wilson (Maewo constituency); Gillion William and Jack Norris (Efate Rural constituency); Matai Seremaiah and Mark Ati (Luganville constituency); Marcellino Barthelemy, Gracia Shadrack, Esmon Saimon, and John Sala (Malekula constituency); Silas Bule and Charlot Salwai (Pentecost constituency); Ralph Regenvanu, Alatoi Ishmael Kalsakau, and Kenneth Natapei (Port Vila constituency); Samson Samsen, Alfred Maoh, and Gaetan Pikioune (Santo Rural constituency); and Jotham Napat, Andrew Napuat, Johnny Koanapo, Bob Loughman Weibeur, and Nako Natuman (Tanna constituency). Two members of Parliament from the tenth legislature—Bakoa Kaltonga (Efate Rural constituency) and James Bule (Ambae constituency)—secured their seats again after having lost them in the previous general election for the eleventh legislature in 2016.

Former Prime Minister Joe Natuman saw his application to be declared an eligible candidate for the 2020 general elections quashed by the Supreme Court. He had submitted the application on 28 January 2020 after the Electoral Commission had written him a letter advising him that he was disqualified for contesting in the general elections pursuant to section 24 (1) (b) of the Representation of the People's Act [CAP 146] (G Willie

2020a). Previously, in March 2018, Natuman was serving as deputy prime minister when he was given a two-year suspended sentence by the Supreme Court after pleading guilty to a charge of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice (Tahana 2018).

Former Prime Ministers Ham Lini and Sato Kilman both lost their seats to new candidates from the Graonmo Jastis Pati (GJP), Ephraim Boe Reve and Edmond Julun. They each secured just over seven hundred votes, which was not enough to secure a seat. GJP's strategy was to field fewer candidates than other political parties and consolidate their voters toward a winning majority. This proved to be a smart move, and from their fifteen candidates who contested the general elections, they gained nine elected members of Parliament. The Leaders Party of Vanuatu and Vanua'aku Pati fielded twenty-five and twenty-seven candidates, respectively, but they only gained seven elected members of Parliament each (R Willie 2020).

Vanua'aku Pati's president and MP for Tanna constituency, Bob Loughman Weibur, was elected by Parliament as prime minister on 20 April. He defeated GJP's president and MP for Port Vila constituency, Regenvanu, 31–21. When Parliament convened to vote through secret ballot, there were thirty MPs from the Vanua'aku Pati, the Union of the Moderate Parties, the National United Party, the Nagriamel political movement, the Green Confederation Party, and other political groups on one side of the chamber. On the other side were twenty-two MPs from GJP, Reunification of Movement for Change, the Leaders Party of Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Liberal Movement,

and other groups (Ligo, Malapa, and Kalsakau 2020a).

Interestingly, outgoing Prime Minister Charlot Salwai Tabimasmamas did not contest for the top post but instead nominated GJP's Regenvanu as a candidate for the prime minister position, while Vanua'aku Pati's Loughman was nominated by outgoing Opposition leader and MP for Port Vila Constituency Ishmael Kalsakau. Kalsakau was later appointed deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs, and other appointed cabinet members included Willie Daniel (minister for agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries and biosecurity); Johnny Koanapo Rasou (minister for finance); Silas Bule (minister for health); Bruno Lengkon (minister for climate change, meteorology and geohazards); Jack Norris Kalmet (minister for lands); Willie Pakoa Saatearoto (minister for youth and sports development); Esmon Saimon (minister for justice and community services); Marc Ati (minister for foreign affairs and external trade); Simeon Davidson Seoule (minister for education); and Jay Ngwele (minister for infrastructure and public utilities). Graciano Shadrack also defected from the Leaders Party of Vanuatu to join the government side when he was appointed as Speaker of Parliament (Ligo, Malapa, and Kalsakau 2020b).

Outgoing Prime Minister Tabimasmamas was later put on trial in November for charges of corruption and perjury after pleading not guilty in the Supreme Court in September to ten counts of bribery and corruption and one count of perjury. The charges followed complaints made by Deputy Prime Minister Kalsakau when he was Opposition leader. In

the filed complaints, Kalsakau alleged that his 2016 motion of no confidence against Salwai failed due to bribery. Former Minister of Agriculture Matai Seremaiah, former Minister of Health Jerome Ludvane, and former MP Tomker Netvunei also pleaded not guilty to bribery charges connected to the case (Willie and Malapa 2020).

Later in December, the Supreme Court found all four defendants not guilty of the corruption and bribery charges, but Salwai was found guilty of perjury because he misled the court when he said the Council of Ministers had approved a decision to create parliamentary secretary positions. He later appealed his suspended sentence of two years and three months (Willie 2021), but the appeal was dismissed by Chief Justice Vincent Lunabek in May 2021, triggering an upcoming by-election in the Pentecost constituency to find his replacement (Bule 2021).

The new government led by Prime Minister Loughman maintained Vanuatu's historical stance to support West Papua's struggle for independence. In his speech to the United Nations (UN) in September, Loughman spoke in favor of self-determination and human rights in West Papua, and Indonesia was quick to lash back, accusing Vanuatu of failing to respect the UN charter's principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of other countries (RNZ 2020). However, Vanuatu's staunch support of West Papua's independence bid is based on the core principles of self-determination and nonalignment. These values have consistently guided how Vanuatu conducts its foreign relations since independence (Kaiku 2019).

Vanuatu faced three major disasters

in 2020: Tropical Cyclone Harold, volcanic ashfall on Tanna Island, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Three deaths and fifty-six injuries were reported in Vanuatu as a result of Tropical Cyclone Harold, a category five cyclone that passed through four countries—Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga—during the first week of April. The reported deaths and injuries resulted from the collapse of buildings, fallen objects, wind-strewn debris, drownings, and preexisting illnesses (*Daily Post* 2020g). The last category five cyclone in Vanuatu was Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015. In addition to Tropical Cyclone Harold, Yasur Volcano experienced increased activity in 2020, including “ongoing explosions and volcanic stem plumes from eruptive vents” (Roberts 2020a). The resulting continuous ashfall left over twenty-eight thousand people from communities in the southeastern, central, and northeastern parts of Tanna in need of immediate food assistance from the government (Roberts 2020a).

On 26 March 2020, the president of Vanuatu signed a declaration for a two-week state of emergency, citing the need to strengthen prevention and containment measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A national coronavirus task force had already been working around the clock since 10 March to establish isolation wards at the Vila Central Hospital and the Northern District Hospital (Roberts 2020b), but the task force was dissolved on 20 March. The state of emergency was extended multiple times for the dual purposes of continuing COVID-19 prevention and containment measures and responding to Tropical Cyclone Harold. Eventually,

it was extended to 31 December 2020. The state of emergency allowed for special powers under the Disaster Risk Management Act No 23 of 2019 to be utilized.

Planning and coordination mechanisms were immediately activated during the state of emergency. The National Disaster Management Office assumed all national coordination, including intersectoral coordination and response management. A national cluster system—including an inter-cluster and eight technical clusters (education; emergency telecommunications; food security and agriculture; gender and protection; health and nutrition; logistics; shelter; and water, sanitation, and hygiene)—was also responsible for coordinating within and between sectors. A Health Incident Management Team and several hospital and provincial health emergency operation centers were established to manage day-to-day health-sector operations in facilities and provinces, and the Ministry of Health created a website to share important COVID-19 updates (Vanuatu Ministry of Health 2020). Other important non-health updates in relation to Tropical Cyclone Harold and the Tanna ashfall were shared regularly on the National Disaster Management Office’s website.

In April, the Vanuatu government announced a 4 billion vatu (VT, about US\$37 million) budget to stimulate the economy and a VT125 million (US\$1.14 million) budget for COVID-19 measures (Roberts, Kalsakau, and Malapa 2020). The government’s stimulus package included deferring taxes such as road taxes, work permits fees, business license fees (except for commercial banks), residence permit

charges, and rent tax. It also included employment and small business subsidies to provide much-needed operational budgets to affected businesses and minimum wages to laid-off workers (*Daily Post* 2020i). A separate budget of VT125 million was also announced to help families affected by Tropical Cyclone Harold and to cover COVID-19 measures (Roberts, Kalsakau, and Malapa 2020).

Donor partners were also quick to announce their own assistance packages. In March, the Chinese government announced a US\$100,000 (VT10.7 million) package to support Vanuatu's efforts to prevent and control COVID-19 (*Daily Post* 2020b). In April, a charter flight from China arrived, bringing essential medical supplies, including thirty-one ventilators, fifty detection kits, three hundred units of disposable protective clothing for medical use, 130 forehead thermometers, two thousand N95 masks, and twenty thousand disposable surgical masks. The delivery of the medical supplies complied with strict COVID-19 protocols (*Daily Post* 2020c).

In April, Australia also announced its VT310 million (US\$2.9 million) assistance package, which went toward the delivery of humanitarian items for the Tropical Cyclone Harold response program. These included solar lanterns, bed nets, and hygiene, shelter, and kitchen kits. The delivery of these items complied with strict COVID-19 protocols, with the Australian Defence Force adopting additional measures, such as wearing protective equipment, providing medical clearances, disinfecting equipment and supplies, and practicing physical distancing at all times. Additional assistance was provided in the form of support

to the National Disaster Management Office and the Vanuatu Red Cross to distribute pre-positioned relief items, additional equipment to the Vanuatu Police Force, and staff for conducting rapid assessments (Roberts and Kalsakau 2020).

New Zealand announced its VT220 million (US\$2 million) assistance package in May, which was earmarked to support the Vanuatu government's stimulus packages. These packages were geared toward keeping people in employment, providing grants to small and medium businesses, supplementing fees for university students, subsidizing commodity producers, and supporting shipping services (*Daily Post* 2020e).

The first COVID-19 case was announced by Prime Minister Loughman in November. The island of Efate was placed on lockdown while all passengers who returned on the same repatriation flight as the COVID-19 patient were tested according to the surveillance and tracing protocols. The case was cleared after a month (Willie, Roberts, and Ligo 2020).

Vanuatu's repatriation program saw over five thousand overseas-based citizens and residents return to Vanuatu and undergo strict COVID-19 protocols to ensure further testing of any suspected cases and isolation and quarantine of any confirmed cases. Russell Tamata, director general of the Ministry of Health, said that this was the highest number of repatriates in the region, and out of these, there was only one confirmed case of COVID-19. This was only possible thanks to the strong COVID-19 protocols and containment measures that had been put in place to prevent importation of the virus (Roberts 2021).

As a result of COVID-19 and the border closure in late March, businesses in Vanuatu reported a fall in revenues by 46 percent in December 2020 (VCCI 2020). The Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industries has continued to advocate for the government to continue its stimulus package into 2021 to support a wage subsidy program and a small business stimulus package program and to make the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out a priority. The government also announced a surplus of VT7.1 billion (US\$64 million) at the end of 2020, so, given that the cost of the two stimulus programs would total VT150 million (US\$1.4 million) per month, it would be feasible to implement the scheme to support the livelihoods of the people of Vanuatu who have been affected by the economic downturn.

The government budget of VT57 billion (US\$520 million) for 2020 (Ligo 2019) also funded some eyebrow-raising activities given the disasters Vanuatu faced, such as the reacquisition of eighty-two state titles that had been given out illegally by former Minister of Lands Steven Kalsakau in 2012, amounting to VT1 billion (US\$9.13 million) (Joshua 2020); the nationwide celebrations to mark the fortieth independence anniversary, worth VT100 million (US\$913,000) (Abel 2020); and the two-day celebrations to mark Vanuatu's graduation from the least developing country category, worth VT37 million (US\$338,000) (Willie 2020b).

On a positive note, major infrastructure projects funded in 2020 included the VT400 million (US\$3.7 million) Freshwota Stadium, funded by FIFA (Bule 2020); the VT61 million

(US\$557,000) upgrade of the Independence Park grandstand, funded by the Vanuatu government (Roberts 2020c); the new correctional facility for female inmates (*Daily Post* 2020d), which was part of New Zealand funding worth VT920 million (US\$8.4 million) toward correctional facilities around Vanuatu (Shing 2020); and the new Supreme Court Hall of Justice, worth over VT1 billion (US\$9.13 million), of which Australia contributed VT240 million (US\$2.2 million) and New Zealand contributed VT227 million (US\$2.08 million) (*Daily Post* 2020f).

The government also announced in June that it would focus more on the productive sector to boost the economy in light of the impacts of COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone Harold, with over 21 percent of the 2021 budget going toward that sector (*Daily Post* 2020a). The 2021 budget has been set at VT52 billion (US\$475 million), which is less than the 2020 budget of VT57 billion (Ligo 2020). Overall, 2020 was a difficult year that saw a newly elected government face the challenges of navigating Vanuatu's economy through COVID-19 and two natural disasters. It will be interesting to see how the government's policy to focus more on the productive sector can improve the economic situation in 2021.

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