

Exploring popular rhetoric about political candidacy in Vanuatu



Vanuatu election posters
Photo Credit: Anna Naupa

by Anna Naupa

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Vanuatu's new coalition government **recently announced a proposed electoral reform** to restrict political candidacy to indigenous and third-generation naturalised citizens. Prime Minister Jotham Napat's government claims the reform will strengthen the governance of Vanuatu's **Citizenship by Investment (CBI) program**, enhance public trust in citizenship processes, preserve national identity and strengthen cultural representation in governance.

The government has yet to elaborate further on specific reform details beyond the information provided in the **100-day plan**. But heated public debates about its purpose have played out since. Opposition leader Alatoi Ishmael Kalsakau has described the move as **legitimising racism and a diversion** from the fundamental leadership issue of accountability. Some commentators in online discussion groups have suggested that the real targets of the proposed reform are two opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) — **Jesse Luo** and **Robert Bohn** — who are naturalised citizens.

Let's see how the existing data stack up against the four desired reform outcomes in the 100-day plan.

First, will political candidacy restrictions improve Vanuatu's governance of the CBI program and enhance public trust in citizenship processes?

The CBI program has **been controversial** since its inception in 2014. Allegations of poor scrutiny of applicants and **citizenship sales to criminals, fugitives, politicians and disgraced businessmen** have prompted regular **parliamentary inquiries** and **independent commissions of inquiry** which invariably recommend strengthened governance and oversight.

Political candidacy, however, is never publicly reported as an issue in relation to CBI program governance.

The link between citizenship and political candidacy emerged in the lead-up to the

2016 snap election. In 2016, and again at the time of the January 2025 snap election, some political campaigns cast the 2013 introduction of dual citizenship as a threat to national sovereignty.

Claims that dual citizenship increases foreign influence in Vanuatu's politics are, however, **unsubstantiated**, as Nick Howlett and I argued back in 2016. The 2013 amendment renamed Article 13 of Vanuatu's Constitution "Recognition of Dual Citizenship" via the ***Citizenship (Amendment) Act No. 39 of 2013***. Importantly, the amendment prohibits political participation of dual citizens who are neither indigenous nor naturalised — in other words, the only citizenship category prohibited is the category of CBI program "golden passport" holders.

So, why is the Vanuatu government revisiting the issue with the claim that the proposed new reform will strengthen the governance of the CBI program? Clearly, eligibility for political participation is already addressed by the current constitutional provisions.

It would make more sense to prioritise more pressing issues such as closing loopholes in the CBI program, strengthening vetting processes and enhancing the regulation of **agent vendors**. This could deliver important changes that would build public trust in the process.

Second, is Vanuatu's national identity under threat? The 100-day plan intends for the electoral reform to preserve national identity, hinting that it is potentially threatened.

A 2023 **national survey on political attitudes** found strong support for both civic and ethnic markers of national identity. Being "born in Vanuatu" and "practicing kastom" were important for over 94% of survey participants. So too was "having Vanuatu citizenship" (94%) and "respect for Vanuatu's political institutions and law" (also 94%). Such findings, from a survey conducted so recently, highlight a clearly strong and vibrant sense of national identity across the country. In fact, the same survey recorded high levels of national pride (more than 82%) across themes such as kastom and culture, Vanuatu history, treatment of women and sport.

If there is no real threat to ideas of national identity, why are political candidacy restrictions being suggested?

Finally, is there a threat to cultural representation in political governance (that is, in Parliament)?

Vanuatu's first-past-the-post, single majoritarian electoral system was designed to ensure that minority populations could obtain a voice in Parliament. This has

produced 18 single-member and multi-member electoral districts. It is why an MP with 236 votes from Paama Island sits equally in Parliament alongside an MP from the Efate Rural constituency with the higher vote count of 2701. Furthermore, since the introduction of dual citizenship in Vanuatu in 2013, non-indigenous (lacking Melanesian heritage), naturalised citizens have accounted for less than 2% of all candidates in national elections.

So, no, cultural representation from different islands is generally not threatened by the current electoral system and citizenship provisions.

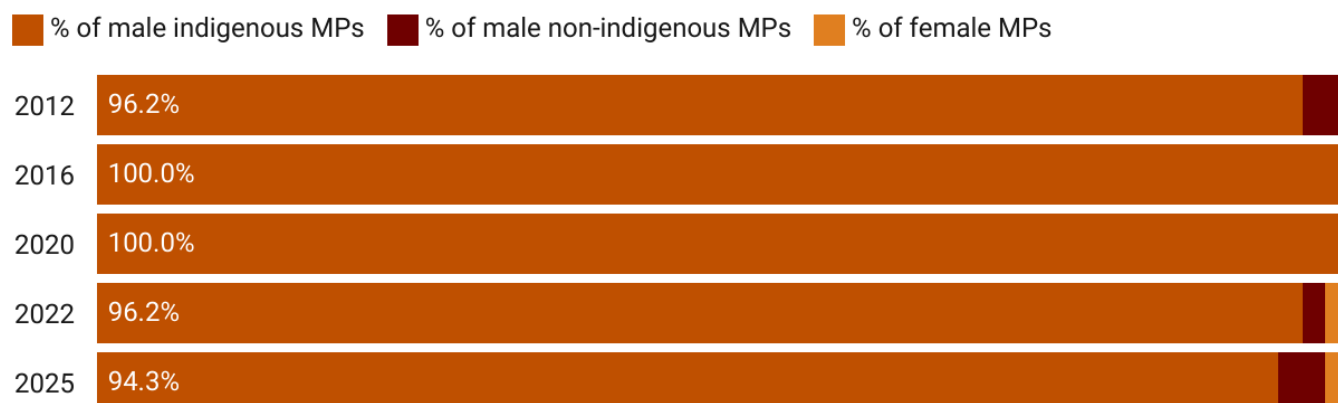
Some exceptions include the Tafea Outer Islands district, which comprises four culturally and linguistically distinct islands but shares a single MP seat. Tafea Outer Islanders' cultural representation in political governance is negligible despite a long-standing call for additional MP seats. The solution to strengthening cultural representation might therefore lie in electoral districting reforms, rather than in political candidacy restrictions.

Vanuatu journalist Mavuku Tokona has expressed disagreement with the proposed reform, saying:

How ironic is it that, when the conversation was about reserving seats for women, the majority of the public were against it, but now [...] we are going to reserve seats for Vanuatu indigenous men because they cannot compete with two naturalised citizens?

He reminds us of an important challenge for any future electoral reforms: how to ensure that parliament reflects the reality of Vanuatu society. Women make up 50% of the adult population but less than 5% of political candidates. There is currently only one female MP.

Figure 1: Male Members of Parliament with Melanesian heritage dominate Vanuatu's 52-member Parliament (2012-2025)



Note: The figure of 3.8% for male non-indigenous MPs elected in 2012 and 2025 general elections corresponds to two seats in Parliament. The figure of 1.9% for male non-indigenous MPs in 2022 and 1.9% for female MPs in 2022 and 2025 corresponds to one seat in Parliament.

Source: Author calculations from Government of Vanuatu Official Gazettes • Created with Datawrapper

Vanuatu politics and the parliament have been dominated by men, with very few women (or naturalised citizens) becoming MPs. Political candidacy reforms need to be designed with a view bringing more women into parliament.

The government's proposed electoral reform has generated active public debate about indigeneity and citizenship, but based on an unclear logic. The **published reasons for restricting political candidacy** to indigenous and third-generation naturalised citizens do not make sense. The recent data pointing to a vibrant sense of national identity and cultural representation highlight that these things are not under threat. Data also show that the myths about increasing numbers of naturalised citizens contesting elections are unsubstantiated. Yet these myths are regularly aired in public debates. It is to be hoped the government will elaborate on the true intent of the electoral reform soon.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging that the government promises to strengthen the governance of the CBI program. It could start with transparency, by publishing long-overdue **officially commissioned** and **annual reports**. Policy effort in connection with electoral reforms would be better directed toward regulating political campaign finance, political redistricting and special measures for women. If the government still wishes to pursue candidacy restrictions, a priority step should be ensuring comprehensive vetting of all political candidates, including consideration of sources of political campaign finance and criminal histories.

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