

How can Vanuatu's new parliament rebuild public trust?

by Anna Naupa

28 January 2025



Civil society march outside the Vanuatu Parliament, November 2023

Photo Credit: Anna Naupa (adapted)

As communities across Vanuatu welcomed a new year and contemplated multiple aspiring political candidates ahead of the 16 January snap election, a popular reggae song was making the rounds.

Oi pipol oli taet (People are tired)

Taet long instability (Tired of instability)

Talem wanem taem (Tell us when)

Bae i gat stability? (When will we get stability?)

The 2025 song by Kymvn-J3H (Erique Kanas) laments a lack of political integrity and condemns the self-serving actions of past parliamentarians. It echoes a national call for leadership on [unemployment, education and an end to instability](#).

Campaigners were very aware of the popular mood and loss of public trust. In my voting district on the outskirts of Port Vila, I listened to many political candidates promise to tackle the issues of economic development, education and health services. One particular political promise made by the Vanuatu Leaders Party — which according to [an unofficial count](#) appears to have secured the most seats — was that of better national leadership.

The other politicians are campaigning for their self-interest, but we are campaigning for the next generation. — *Efate Rural candidate, Vanuatu Leaders Party*

But the ability to separate local constituency interests from the work of running an entire country is what has challenged past political leadership – and brought its downfall in [some notorious cases](#) – ultimately prompting [public demand for better political integrity legislation](#).

Local constituency expectations of a Member of Parliament (MP) are high. A [2024 Political Attitudes Survey](#) found that voters felt that MPs should focus on community projects (35%) while only 8% felt their role in governing the country was important.

A mere 16% reported that an MP should promote national development.

Another 2024 report on [voter motivations in Vanuatu](#) confirms that voters prioritise the ability of a candidate to represent them and the local community interests in Parliament. The law-making role of MPs and a candidate's ability manage the national budget was rated as "very low" by voters.

One former rural MP who party-swapped three times over the past three legislatures explained to me:

My voters pressure me to stay in government, even if it means changing parties. Being [on the] government side means I can lobby better and deliver results to my communities.

Being on the government side also brings additional allowances to MPs and their closest advisors, in addition to the standard [MP constituency funds](#), and has been a key factor in political patronage practices.

The past MP-constituent relationships that shaped Vanuatu's political instability around local, rather than national, interests will be tested by Vanuatu's next Parliament, the 14th legislature.

The official results of the 2025 snap election will be announced imminently. The date of the first parliamentary sitting post-election must be announced by 6 February, 21 days after the election as per the [parliamentary standing orders](#).

The new Parliament will put to test the candidates' election promises that a different type of political leadership will deliver the much-called-for stability.

The [constitutional amendments](#) agreed to in [Vanuatu's May 2024 national referendum](#) were designed to curtail the previously capricious political affiliations. While they do not prevent entire parties from changing affiliation during a parliamentary term, they regulate the unfettered party-swapping of individual MPs in their pursuit of power.

How can Vanuatu's 14th legislature rebuild public trust and restore parliamentary integrity?

As I suggested to media during Vanuatu's [2025 election coverage](#), there are three things the next Parliament should do to rebuild public trust and confidence in its integrity and concern for the national interest.

First, the formation of the next coalition government should contain **a public pledge by the union of political groups, that is documented in black and white** for the

entire nation to see and hold to account. This would be additional to the standard swearing in of new parliamentarians and back-room memoranda of understanding. It would demonstrate a recognition that — as [Kymvn-J3H's catchy reggae lyrics](#) describe — the Parliament needs to regain an integrity and dignity that has been lost.

Second, the new government must immediately issue a clear **100-day plan or manifesto** that prioritises the passage of the 2025 national budget and tackles earthquake recovery, including business resilience. It must include a sequenced plan to restore reliable inter-island transportation for neglected islands and clearly address the compounding problems of teacher salaries ahead of a new school year.

The plan must also include — on a national scale with attention to urgent local needs — actions that can be implemented immediately to address youth unemployment and the rising cost of living. For example youth skills development could be linked to the projected increase in post-earthquake construction jobs and price controls could be considered. The plan must be made publicly available, with transparent, regular communication to the people advising on progress. [Past governments announced 100-day plans](#) but never shared details publicly, compromising accountability.

Third, it is essential that the new Parliament **foster a vocal, stable Opposition** that respects its role in providing scrutiny of government business and maintaining a democratic balance of power.

Prior to the [18 November 2024 dissolution of Vanuatu's Parliament](#), the Opposition had been [challenging an unseen proposed bill to increase MP allowances](#) and monitoring selected government projects. However, the past instability limited the opportunity for a stable Opposition to maintain the necessary contestability for policy making, and follow-up between sittings.

The new Opposition will need to be fully committed — ideally for the full term — to properly scrutinising the breadth of proposed bills and public accounts as well as being the people's advocate for proper public consultation on legislation, with reports made available. The new Opposition will be critical in reminding the Government to be transparent, and to regularly check on the progress of plans, programs, reforms and commissions of enquiry. It will also be critical for the Opposition to work with the Government to ensure that there is public reporting on MPs' allowances and benefits, information on which has only been released by [a small number of MPs](#).

If the new Parliament can commit itself to restore national integrity — through

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actions, transparent plans and decisions, and the negotiated roles for a stable Government and Opposition — then Vanuatu will have a better chance of overcoming the litany of economic and social challenges we face.

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