

Transcript: Political instability, the MSG and regional politics – an interview with Prime Minister Joe Natuman of Vanuatu

Cain: My name is Tess Newton Cain. I'm a Research Associate at the Development Policy Centre. And this morning, on a sunny morning here in Port Vila, it's a great honour to be able to spend a small time with Prime Minister Joe Natuman. Prime Minister, thank you very much for making some time, and welcome to Pacific Conversations.

Natuman: Thank you.

Cain: So let's start with the elections question. As we know, Vanuatu will be having the next general elections in 2016. What do you want your government to have achieved before then?

Natuman: Well the most important thing is as we know there is the issue of instability in the Vanuatu political system, particularly in Parliament. And as you saw, there is instability in government. And what we have tried to do is try to put some legislative and constitutional framework in place before that election takes place particularly in terms of political reform.

When we drafted this constitution in 1979, we did not anticipate that there would be - because at that time there were basically two major political parties, the Vanua'aku Party, and the Union of Moderate Parties. So since then there has been, there's too many political parties so major parties have been disintegrated, forming small political groupings. So what we are doing now is to look at political reform.

There has been some work done previously with Professor Don Patterson has assisted us in drafting some papers regarding political integrity arrangements here. But we still need to do more work. And at the moment we are engaging with the Commonwealth Secretariat in London and they have discussed this issue recently. When I was in New York with the UN General Assembly, I talked with the Secretary General. They visited us a couple of weeks ago. And I will be talking with the Speaker of Parliament, so that during this November session we will get a, we will organise a forum whereby members of Parliament and other stakeholders will be consulted on the way forward in this political reform.

Looking at similar arrangements like they have in Papua New Guinea, political integrity bill or act which we saw recently, in the Solomon Islands also adopted. So we will be looking at the same kind of arrangements here before the elections.

Cain: I wanted to mention to you about the changes in Papua New Guinea. And, as you say, the Solomon Islands have also undertaken some of that. Are there any aspects of that that cause you concern? Have you done some thinking about how Vanuatu might learn from those experiences and possibly do it differently?

Natuman: Well I haven't really studied it closely. I think in Solomon Islands is more to do with political groupings registration of political parties, which we think is important as we'll have to register political parties so that those political parties will be able to declare any gifts they receive during election so that things are transparent and accountable.

In Papua New Guinea, I'm concerned that the time whereby you can put a censure motion is mostly too long. I think it's a question of balance. We should be able to remove any government that's become unpopular. We should not entrench a government in office just because they want to be in office. So we have to have a balance between all these things, scenarios. We will certainly look at the two, Solomon Islands and PNG system to try to find one which we think is more appropriate to our use.

Cain: Moving to look a little more broadly, and I guess it follows on from what we talked about with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, you recently paid an official visit to the Secretariat of the Melanesian Spearhead Group and that's the first such visit by a Prime Minister of Vanuatu. How important is the MSG to Vanuatu? And how important do you think Vanuatu is to the MSG?

Natuman: Vanuatu was really involved with the initiation of the establishment of MSG. Our first Prime Minister Walter Lini who I served for 12 years as his advisor. He was instrumental in creating MSG. It evolved over a number of years with other leaders in the MSG Sir Michael Somare, Sir Julius Chan, Pius Wingti, and also in the Solomons, Solomon Mamaloni and also Sir Peter Kenilorea. They were involved in the beginning to establish this body.

Initially it was some kind of political bloc. We thought we could discuss things better within our groupings, particularly Solomons, Vanuatu and PNG. Fiji was more or less, at that time they were considering themselves as being sort of in between Melanesia and Polynesia and didn't know where at that time when Ratu Mara was the Prime Minister. It was only when Rabuka came in they were more associated with the Melanesia bloc.

The MSG was established to drive the cause of the Kanak people of New Caledonia - to enlist New Caledonia on the C24 with the United Nations as a non-governing territory. And of course now it's expanded to cover trade issues, climate change, a whole lot of things. So it's an important subregional bloc. We see ourselves as subregional, contributing to regional arrangements, issues that have been raised by the Pacific Islands Forum. And we will continue to be a subregional and trying to -

Of course, there are things we will need to look at more carefully because our people in trade and areas are concerned about the free trade arrangement between MSG, we are trying to look into those and see that there are more benefits for our own business and trade people here. But MSG is very important for us, particularly now when we are continuing to talk more in terms of the rights and aspirations of the Melanesian people who are still colonised like the West Papuans, so MSG is important. And this is an issue which we are still discussing during the last summit in New Caledonia.

For the first time MSG accepted the fact that West Papuan people have a right to self-determination and independence. And we will continue to do that. There is a pending case of the application of West Papua to MSG that is still under discussion. So hopefully next year we will discuss further on those issues.

Cain: Just to follow on from that in relation to the West Papuan independence issue, you have officially informed the Indonesian government that it is the intention of your

government to take this issue to the United Nations. What UN processes are available to Vanuatu in that respect? And how will your government access those processes?

Natuman: Well we've discussed the issue of West Papua all along in the United Nations General Assembly. It's been raised by our previous Prime Ministers, Prime Minister Barak Sopo raised it when he was there and even former Prime Minister Moana Carcasses Kalosil, when he was Prime Minister he raised it at the UN.

So the Indonesians know our position. And I raised it during this year's UNGA general debate. And we will continue to raise those issues. And what we want to do is to try to get a regional consensus, regional support in so far as MSG is concerned, so far as the Forum is concerned to gain support from there and then we can proceed further through the UN level. Because, we are particularly concerned about human rights violations in West Papua.

This is an issue which every country in the Pacific Forum, including Australia and New Zealand should be voicing concern about the human rights abuses. I mean, I hear countries accusing other countries outside our region of human rights violation, but within our own region people are shutting their mouth. I don't know why. This is an issue. Apart from the normal diplomatic issues.

Cain: So I'd like to finish again on the foreign relations side of things. You met recently with the leadership of the People's Republic of China. What's your current assessment of Vanuatu's relationship with China? And how do you see it developing in the future?

Natuman: Well China is a big country. It's now the second largest economy in the world. So our relations will continue to remain one of good friendly relations with the People's Republic of China. And they are assisting us in a number of infrastructure developments here. And we will certainly, I have invited President Xi during our meeting in Nanjing recently to visit us. However, he is coming to G20 in Brisbane. And he has invited me and other Pacific leaders, I think 6 or 7 other Pacific leaders with diplomatic relations with China to go and have a high level dialogue with him in the middle of this month, I think on the 22nd of November in Nadi.

And I will go to that meeting including others from other countries. So China is an important player in the world today, in terms of economic development and I know in Australia a lot of the mining that's going on is Chinese investment and Chinese money in Australia. And we have a lot of Australian tourists coming here because of the booming industry that is helped partly by Chinese money. So we should not be closing our mind. We would welcome Chinese investments here as well. And we get a few Chinese investments. So we will continue to maintain good and friendly relations with China and also Chinese investment is always welcome to Vanuatu.

Cain: Okay. Prime Minister thank you once again for your time and for sharing your thoughts. And we wish you well with all your government's endeavours in the future.

Natuman: Thank you.