



FRANCOPHONES AGAINST INDEPENDENCE? DECOLONISING A CONDOMINIUM IN VANUATU

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Vanuatu today is a sovereign republic, with a population of just under quarter of a million, 95% of which is indigenous [VANUATU NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE]. It consists in a group of about 80 islands in the western Pacific, close to New Caledonia. It is a successful democracy, with a large diversity of political parties and an independent judiciary upholding the rule of law. It is one of eight countries to be a member of both the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* and the Commonwealth of Nations.¹ But while the other seven were mostly divided between the French and British Empires (such as Cameroon), or occupied at different times by the British and the French (such as Mauritius or St Lucia), Vanuatu is the only country to have been a Franco-British Condominium – governed jointly, in its entirety, by the British and the French. It was this Condominium, and the divergence between French and British approaches to decolonisation, which made Vanuatu's independence, and its post-colonial politics, somewhat unique.

A unique condominium

France was one of the earliest Western countries to develop a colonialist interest in the Pacific Islands, while the British saw little value in the region [HUFFER : 62-63], even under imperialist governments in the late 19th century. Arguably the main factor in the British annexation of south-eastern New Guinea or the Solomon Islands, in the 1880s, was their proximity to Australia, and the urgent, repeated calls by Australia's autonomous governments that these islands should not fall into French or German hands [HEMPENSTALL : 26]. Such considerations also applied to the New Hebrides

¹ The others are Cameroon, Canada, Dominica, Mauritius, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, and the Seychelles.

(as Vanuatu was then known). A small number of mainly French coconut planters had settled there, encouraged by the *Société française des Nouvelles-Hébrides*, which campaigned for French annexation. Australia vehemently objected, leading the United Kingdom to express its own –somewhat more reluctant – objections. By means of compromise, Paris and London agreed, in 1887, to establish a “joint naval commission” over the islands. British authorities were despatched to defend the interests of resident British subjects, who were primarily Australian planters, while French authorities were to do the same in relation to French settlers. This measure did not, *de jure*, constitute a declaration of annexation by either side, and the indigenous inhabitants remained beyond the commission’s jurisdiction. In 1906, the commission formally evolved into a joint colonial government, referred to as the Condominium.

The principle was fairly straightforward, albeit somewhat innovative, but its application required wasteful, and sometimes confusing, complexity. Both countries exercised jurisdiction over the entire territory, but maintained separate institutions. A French police force, French law and French courts, French education and health systems, coexisted side by side with British equivalents. French settlers were subject to French jurisdiction, and British subjects to British jurisdiction. Settlers who were neither French nor British were required to choose what jurisdiction they preferred to be registered under. Any legal cases opposing settlers of different nationalities were brought before a mixed court, presided over by a Spanish judge for the sake of neutrality [HUFFER : 63-64]. Indigenous New Hebrideans were under no jurisdiction but their own; they were granted neither French nor British nationality [MILES : 18]. They were left largely to their own affairs, at least initially. The colonial authorities’ recognition of settlers’ claims to indigenous lands, however, had an obvious impact on the lives of native communities on some islands.

It was not until the 1960s that either government paid much attention to the education of the indigenous inhabitants. That concern had been gratefully left to missionary schools – where a natural rivalry prevailed between the efforts of French Catholics and those of English or Scottish Protestants. In the 1960s, the French authorities began to set up secular French schools, and the British responded by introducing a harmonised education policy for the English-speaking missionary schools. From that point on, education became a source of competition, focusing on language more so even than religion.

The French presence was to be secured by producing a greater number of French-speaking indigenous children, who would be taught to feel loyalty to France [MILES : 47]. The French poured about five times more funding into education than the British, partly so as to compensate for an existing imbalance: in 1960, more than two-thirds of indigenous schoolchildren were enrolled in English-speaking schools. By 1980, thanks in part to the reportedly better quality of the new Francophone schools, linguistic parity had been achieved [MILES : 50]. Crucially, however, in the late stages of the colonial era, French education was not aimed at preparing the indigenous population for independence, whereas the British had begun to train a potential indigenous governing élite.

British and French attitudes to decolonisation

In the last two years of the 1970s, the British had hastened their last few Pacific colonies (the Ellice Islands, the Solomon Islands and the Gilbert Islands) towards independence. The British government had done so of its own initiative, without awaiting the emergence of any significant pro-independence movement in these long-neglected, underdeveloped islands. The United Kingdom was unwinding the remnants of its Empire. It was releasing its claim over small island territories which it had never been particularly interested in in the first place; it had already refocused its foreign policy away from the Empire or the Commonwealth, and towards the United States and Europe. By the end of the decade, other than the tiny remote island of Pitcairn (with a population of only a few dozen people, descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers), the New Hebrides was the last remaining British colony in the Pacific, and the British were keen to withdraw.

By contrast, France had not relinquished any of its Pacific Island territories, and had no intention of doing so. French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides remained under French authority. There were obvious concerns that a French withdrawal from the New Hebrides would encourage the increasingly significant pro-independence movement in neighbouring New Caledonia. France was also concerned about the future of the 3,000 or so white French inhabitants of the colony (who greatly outnumbered British subjects) [HUFFER : 239], and, to a lesser extent perhaps, about the rights of indigenous French-speakers, and the preservation of a French linguistic heritage. As the British had been preparing an indigenous

élite for government, whereas the French had not, it seemed inevitable that the government after independence would be in the hands of Anglophones [MURRAY].

Consequently, the New Hebrides were the one territory in which the British and French attitudes to the worldwide process of decolonisation inevitably collided. The British desire to withdraw was hampered by French opposition. The French adopted a policy of deliberately obstructing the British attempt at unifying the French and British institutions into new, national institutions which could be handed over to the New Hebrideans [WITTERSHEIM : 137-138]. From the French perspective, the priority was to delay the process while they belatedly trained a Francophone élite.

Founded in 1971, the New Hebrides National Party grew into a large, well-structured pro-independence movement with significant grassroots support. It was, indeed, led by an educated indigenous Anglophone élite [MACDONALD : 188-190]. Calling for the restitution of indigenous lands, and the promotion of indigenous and Christian values, its objective was to pressure the French into conceding independence; in this, it was tacitly supported by the British [MILES : 70]. In 1978, its leader, Father Walter Lini, an Anglican priest who had studied in Auckland [HUFFER : 97-98], unilaterally declared a “provisional people’s government” [FISCHER : 249].

France conceded, and Lini’s National Party² won a general election in November 1979 to lead the country into independence the following year. Simultaneously, the French expressed support for the French-speaking minorities, be they white or indigenous, who were, to various degrees, hostile to the idea of an immediate independence under a National Party government. French-speakers did not necessarily object to independence in principle, but wished to delay it until they could form their own large-scale political movement, with similar grassroots support to Lini’s party.

On the eve of independence, in 1980, peaceful secessionist movements broke out on the islands of Espiritu Santo and Tanna. These were indigenous movements, bringing together regionalists, who rejected the authority of a

² It was soon to be renamed the Vanua’aku Pati (‘Party of our Land’), so as to emphasise its indigenous focus and legitimacy.

national indigenous government,³ and Francophones, whose wish was largely for France to stay on a while longer, if not indefinitely.⁴ The movements were put down – by the British colonial police on Tanna, and by the Papua New Guinean armed forces (at Lini’s request) on Espiritu Santo [MILES : 23]. Lini’s government deported twenty-three French residents, accusing them of having supported the secessionists.

Legacy

Vanuatu became an independent republic on 31 July, 1980. The new Constitution, which celebrated the country’s “struggle for freedom”, recognised both French and English as official languages, although in practice English was to be the language of government. Walter Lini was re-elected in 1983 and 1987, remaining in power until 1991. The main opposition party was that of the Francophones, the *Union des partis modérés*, led by Maxime Carlot, of mixed French and indigenous parentage. Carlot accused the Lini government of discrimination against the Francophone community, and aimed to defend its interests [MILES : 25-26]. The Lini government’s relations with France were abysmal. Lini naturally resented the French attempts to thwart independence, and accused the French of having stirred up the secessionist movements. The two countries also maintained a territorial dispute over small, French-administered islands between Vanuatu and New Caledonia; and Lini actively supported the pro-independence *Front de Libération nationale kanak et socialiste* (FLNKS) in New Caledonia. He expelled the French ambassador on three occasions during the 1980s [HUFFER : 243]. By contrast, Lini expressed very little resentment towards the British, and his relations with the United Kingdom were, rather

³ While Lini’s rhetoric and ideals invoked indigenous custom as constituting the very heart and essence of the soon-to-be nation, dissenting island community leaders objected that custom held meaning only on the most local level. Consequently, they viewed the Vanuatuan “nation-state” as an artificial colonial construct. In their eyes, the new authorities in Port Vila had no more legitimacy over the archipelago’s myriad formerly independent small-scale communities than did the departing Europeans.

⁴ In some cases, this was pure pragmatism. France offered free education and healthcare in Tanna, which islanders feared they would lose if France granted independence. [SILLITOE : 195]

than friendly or confrontational, virtually non-existent.⁵ Having withdrawn, the Thatcher government had no interest whatsoever in Vanuatu, and left the country to its own devices. In 1991, Maxime Carlot was elected Prime Minister, and re-established cordial relations with France. During the 1990s, Vanuatu's two-party system, in which each party was aligned with a linguistic community, fragmented into multiple political parties,⁶ which very often included both French- and English-speakers.⁷ Language ceased to be a factor of resentment or division.

Nonetheless, there is still a legacy to the Condominium, to the colonial period's linguistically separate education system, and to the particularities of decolonisation. Every year, on February 15, the Jon Frum movement holds a rather unusual ceremony on the island of Tanna. The Jon Frum movement is a "cargo cult", one which periodically fascinates foreign media. Profoundly marked by the presence of comparatively wealthy American soldiers in the New Hebrides during the Second World War, the followers of this movement await the arrival of "Jon Frum", an American who is expected to bring material wealth to the community. In the 1970s, the movement was opposed to the creation of Vanuatu as a unified sovereign state incorporating Tanna, and sided with the Francophone secessionists. Jon Frum's followers are now fully reconciled with the Vanuatuan state, but every year, alongside the *Stars and Stripes*, they raise the French flag. An expression of gratitude for France's tacit support of Tanna's secessionists in the 1970s [RAFFAELE].

Similarly, in 2006, a representative of Tanna presented a gift to French President Jacques Chirac at the Quai Branly museum of worldwide indigenous arts and cultures in Paris, in thanks for the actions of a French warship which, in 1912, was said to have chased an oppressive Scottish Presbyterian missionary off the island, allowing the islanders to resume their

⁵ Lini did, however, demand compensation from the United Kingdom as well as from France for damage caused by the secessionist movements, holding the two powers jointly responsible in law, despite his ire being focused on the French.

⁶ In 1987, there were only two political parties represented in Parliament. In 2012, there were seventeen.

⁷ As of January 2013, the government reportedly consists in eight "Anglophones" and five "Francophones", though there is of course a large degree of multilingualism. [MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES]

own customs [ANON., NEWS.VU]. The French had thus been moulded into the image of historic protectors, against the Anglophones. And in at least one preschool on Tanna, July 14 is still celebrated, complete with a raising of the French flag to the sound of the *Marseillaise*. In 2005, a representative of the national government attended that annual school ceremony, wherein speeches emphasised the children's belonging to a translational Francophone culture. A Francophone Vanuatuan newspaper reported that several communities, admittedly very much a minority, still expressed a form of patriotism towards France [TIONA], almost as though the colonial period had never ended. Significantly, but perhaps not surprisingly, this remnant of Francophilia has no Anglophile equivalent. If indigenous Anglophones in the 1970s and 80s were at all grateful to the United Kingdom, it was for its willingness to withdraw and grant independence to the colony. Whereas Francophones' attachment to France was grounded in what they perceived as France's resistance to an independence which handed power to the English-speakers.

That legacy has mostly subsided, but it has not disappeared entirely – making Vanuatu a fascinatingly unique example of a country born from the outcome of two powers' opposite policies, at the twilight of their empires.

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NB : Les sites Internet ont été vérifiés le 14 février 2013.

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