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# TROUBLE IN PARADISE

## — *Vanuatu*

### Preface

The island nation of Vanuatu has had a difficult post-colonial history. Forced to watch on as surrounding Pacific nations experience a tourism boom, the country has relied on donor aid. But a new Green prime minister is determined to ring the changes.

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When cruise ships arrive at Port Vila on Vanuatu's main island of Efate, tourists en route to private Pacific retreats rarely stop to take in the surroundings of the Melanesian island chain's capital city. If they did, beyond the coconut palms and endless blue ocean, they would see a city and a country suffering the usual struggles of paradise - legacies of colonialism, cyclone-battered shores, rising sea levels, crumbling infrastructure and an economy still propped up by international donors and NGOs.

It has been 33 years since the French and British gave up their bizarre co-rule of Vanuatu - then the New Hebrides - known in legal terms as a "condominium" (although many locals at the time preferred to call it a pandemonium). The islands, just three hours' flight from Brisbane, have since struggled to hold on to stable government, with parliamentary sittings regularly playing out the kind of corruption scandals, no-confidence votes and oustings that are all too common in Pacific politics. While surrounding nations such as Fiji look to large-scale tourism and resources to develop their economies, Vanuatu has stagnated - international aid equals 13 per cent of a **GDP** reliant on piecemeal tourism and subsistence agriculture.

When Tahiti-born Moana Carcasses Katokai Kalosil became prime minister in March, the 50-year-old became not only the country's first non-indigenous leader but also the world's only Green head of state. He wasted no time getting to work, announcing a 100-day plan tackling 68 points including the termination of a defence agreement with Indonesia, a fresh dialogue with the traditional leadership of the Malvatumauri (Council of Chiefs) and a commitment to find out just how many unknown friends of former governments are travelling the world under Vanuatu diplomatic papers.



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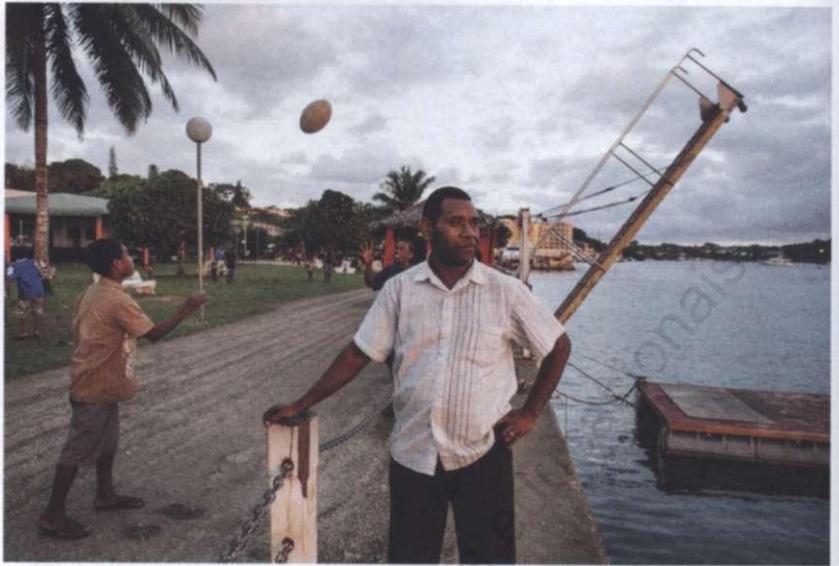
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- 02 Fruit-and-vegetable vendors, Port Vila
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- 03 Life expectancy figures outside the Ministry of Finance in the capital
- 04 Burnt-out stadium in Port Vila
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Carcasses has been a vocal participant in the five-member Melanesian Spearhead Group, which he has used as a platform to speak loudly in favour of West Papuan independence, and has called on Australia to deliver a formal apology for slavery practices in the 1800s, known as "black-birding", where islanders were taken to Queensland as indentured labour.

Political intrigue in Port Vila tends to be of little interest to villagers outside the capital, where everyday governance - including issues such as youth crime, food production and local employment - falls under the traditional purview of a hierarchy of Council of Chiefs. In the low-lying coastal village of Pango, which maintains its own bureaucracies to look after a population of several thousand, chairman of the Council of Chiefs Peter Kalmos Kalontan tells MONOCLE the kinds of investment in tourism they are making locally are key to the future of their village and the country.

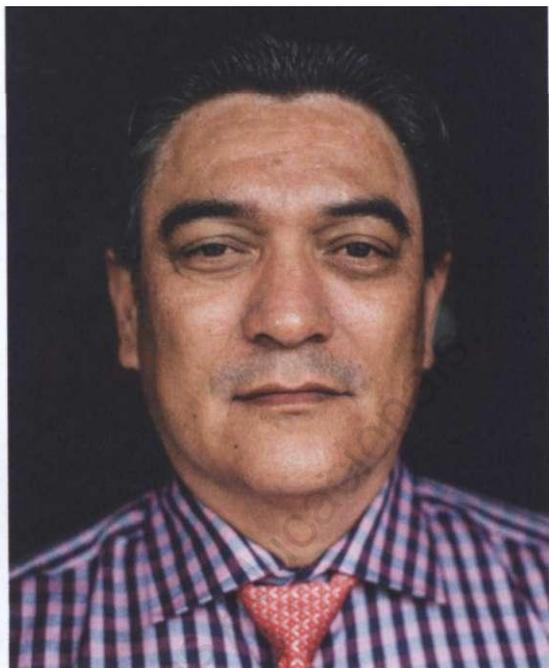
"Vanuatu seems to be one of the countries in the Pacific that resists a lot of tourism," he says, as village paramount



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## Q & A

**Moana Carcasses**  
**Katokai Kalosil**  
**Prime minister**  
**Vanuatu**

**What does it mean to be a Green prime minister in Vanuatu?**

I'm not a Green like you have in France where their ideology is "We don't develop the country." I'm a Green who understands that good development means respect not only for the environment but also the people. Vanuatu has yet to develop, so we can start some good long-term projects, with respect for nature, the population and our cultures.

**What can you do in the long term to reduce the country's dependence on aid?**

We have a small economy and Vanuatu needs to develop its tourism - but this can't happen if we don't have a proper airport, which we're planning to build. If everything goes to plan, it will bring in one million tourists a year, two years after its opening. It will double our GDP over the next 10 years.

**There are other considerations in terms of environmental and cultural impact. How do you address those?**

We now have about 150,000 tourists a year arriving by air and about 250,000 tourists a year arriving by ship. If that figure doubles or triples, people need to prepare themselves. This is why there's going to be lots of consul-

tation, so the people can understand. If you're asking for development, if you want the government to construct more roads and provide more free education, then we need to make some money - and growing the economy has some repercussions for the way of life [here] in the future.

**When you took office, you terminated a military agreement with Indonesia as an expression of solidarity with the West Papuan independence struggle. That seems a risky thing to do.**

The importance was to show that Vanuatu is not for sale, for money or for comfort. We have a principle; we need to defend that. We still have a diplomatic relationship with Indonesia and we want to keep that, because we want the door open to discuss West Papua. Little Vanuatu is principled and if it can say something, it will do.

**You've spoken passionately about West Papua at regional forums and you've allowed people from its independence movement to set up offices in Port Vila. Why is the issue important to you?**

It is my heart; I've always been a big fighter. I've been arrested here a few times by the police for vocalising that the government was doing the wrong thing. I remember being arrested protesting against corruption during the government of Barak Sope in 2000, giving out pamphlets. I say to people, speak out against your government, this is your right. Today, I'm

the prime minister. If I don't do anything, who's going to do something? People are killed over in West Papua on a weekly basis. Of course we cannot fight but we can address it as a diplomatic issue.

**Vanuatu's relationship with Australia got a little difficult last year with the expulsion of federal police after a spat with the previous prime minister. They're back now; how are relations?**

The Australians will always be here. Strategically they are the biggest donor in the Pacific and we need to deal with them. But they understand partnership. They say, "Prime minister, take the lead, tell us your vision and we will help - but we want to make sure that every dollar invested in Vanuatu is benefiting the people."

**Government here has never been stable. Can it be now?**

I guess one day the politicians will wake up and say, "Well, we've had enough of these problems, let's sit around the table and look at the constitution and make some changes." It has not happened yet. It will happen soon. I've found out that when you form a government, there are promises that you make as prime minister. And if you don't keep them, your government will be unstable. — (M)

chief Roland Kaluatman Maseiman nods his approval alongside. He laments that the strange change in seasons has made it impossible to undertake their traditional slash-and-burn agriculture, leaving the village short of yams and other staples. "If we had the money," he says, "we'd have turned this into a little tourism community and relocated our people to a more agrarian type of village."

Back in Port Vila, Carcasses sits with MONOCLE in his office, a late-modernist relic left behind by the French. He expresses hope for a stable future built on increased tourism but acknowledges such growth won't come without a cultural and environmental cost. "We got our independence," he says. "But really the economy is not controlled by us - and we want to change that." — (M)