

Vanuatu government collapses following Australian economic threats

Frank Gaglioti
22 December 2004

After only four months in office, the Vanuatu government headed by Prime Minister Serge Vohor was brought down by a parliamentary vote of no confidence on December 11. The ousting of Vohor was the culmination of bitter domestic political infighting and the direct intervention of the Australian government in the affairs of the small South Pacific Island nation.

The immediate pretext for the move against Vohor was his decision to establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan in return for aid of more than \$US20 million. Vohor only turned to Taipei, however, after Canberra threatened to cut off financial assistance unless the country adhered Australian-imposed standards of “good governance”. Australia is the largest aid donor to Vanuatu.

Following the no-confidence vote, Ham Lini, who was deputy prime minister before his National United Party deserted Vohor, was installed as the new prime minister. A week later Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer suddenly appeared in Port Vila for discussions with the new government after changing his plans to include Vanuatu on his Pacific tour.

On December 18, Downer and Lini signed an agreement committing Vanuatu to “transparency and democracy, pledging to combat transnational crime”. Downer reassured Lini that Australian aid would continue. “I visited because there’s an opportunity to put our relationship back on track, and the signing of this statement of principles does put our relationship firmly back on track,” he said.

In a revealing comment to the press, Lini admitted that the Australian threat to cut off aid to Vanuatu had been a significant factor in ousting Vohor. Asked by a journalist if Canberra’s stance influenced the parliamentary vote, he replied: “I would say a flat yes”. Vanuatu’s relationship with Australia, Lini declared, was more valued because of “what has happened in the past few weeks”.

Downer’s actions in Vanuatu are part of a fundamental shift in Australian foreign policy. The quid pro quo for Australia’s military involvement in the US-led invasion of Iraq was US support for a more aggressive, interventionist approach by Canberra in the Asia Pacific region. Over the past 18 months, the Howard government has flagrantly flouted the sovereignty of Pacific Island nations using a mixture of bullying and bribes

to dictate policy and impose Australian advisers.

In July 2003, Canberra dispatched an Australian-led intervention force of troops, police and officials to the Solomon Islands. Under the guise of saving the “failed state”, Australian officials have, with the nominal approval of the Solomon Islands government, taken over key administrative posts in the police, finance and jail system.

Two months later, the Howard government strong-armed the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government into accepting an “enhanced cooperation package” by threatening to cut off aid. Under the far-reaching arrangement, Australian officials and police are in the process of being installed to oversee the functioning of the PNG state apparatus.

In August 2004, Australia brokered a deal with bankrupt Nauru to send Australian Federal Police to the island and to impose an Australian official as Secretary of Finance.

The ousting of Vohor is part of this pattern. In May, his predecessor Edward Natapei, who was widely regarded as Australia’s man, was compelled to call a general election to avoid a no-confidence vote in his government. A record number of independents contested the July 6 poll, indicating widespread disaffection with the major parties over the country’s continuing economic and social crisis.

Vohor’s Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) and Natapei’s Vanuaaku Pati (VP) both lost about half their MPs and 25 new members were elected to the 52-member parliament. The election was followed by three weeks of political turmoil as party leaders attempted to put together a viable coalition. Finally, on July 29, the UMP which had the biggest block of seats—just 10—cobbed together a fragile alliance.

From the outset, Vohor government was anathema to Canberra. Vanuatu, which only achieved independence in 1980, was previously jointly ruled by Britain and France. Vohor’s UMP is a francophone party with ties to France—one of Australia’s chief rivals in the Pacific. In the course of the election, Vohor campaigned publicly against Australian interference in Vanuatu and the Pacific, and repeatedly clashed with Natapei over the issue.

In early September, Vohor, backed by his foreign minister Barak Sope, announced the expulsion of two Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers, accusing them of spying and interfering

in domestic politics. The *Vanuatu Daily Post* wrote at the time: “[T]he decision to kick out the AFP has been expected ever since the new government came into power. It remains to be seen how the Australian government will react...”

The police, along with two Australian advisors attached to the State Law Office, were asked to leave by September 15. Defending the decision, Sope declared: “Vanuatu cannot just turn up in Sydney and set up a police station there and spy on Australians. It is not on.”

While attempting to appeal to Melanesian nationalism, Vohor and Sope were careful not to go too far in alienating Canberra. For all their grandstanding against Australia’s imperious actions in the Pacific, they did not oppose the Australian-led intervention in the Solomons nor withdraw the five Vanuatuan police officers from the force.

Downer, however, immediately went on the offensive, threatening to cut off aid if Vohor forced the Australian police to leave. “There is not much point in wasting money on good governance programs and assisting governments, as distinct from the generality of the community, with reform programs, if they’re going to get into kicking people out on allegations of spying and the like,” he declared.

Confronted by Canberra’s threats, the government in Port Vila rapidly wilted. The two police left Vanuatu on September 15, but the following day Vohor retracted the expulsion order and let the officers return. The backdown did not end the Howard government’s campaign. Downer continued to insist that Vanuatu adhere to Australian guidelines on “good governance”—that is, to follow Canberra’s policy dictates in areas such as finance, policing and foreign policy.

In a bid to secure an alternate source of aid, Vohor attempted to exploit the long-running rivalry between China and Taiwan in the Pacific. Without the knowledge or approval of his cabinet, Vohor signed a deal with Taiwan on November 3 to establish diplomatic relations in return for an aid package. The move provoked an outcry in Beijing, which promptly suspended Chinese aid, and opposition from Canberra, which has sought to maintain the financial dependence of Pacific Island countries on Australia.

In Port Vila, Vohor immediately became the target of political intriguing. On November 25, opposition leader Sato Kilman signalled his intention to table a no-confidence motion. He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that “China-Taiwan relations” had motivated the move.

On the same day, Downer dispatched two senior Australian diplomats to Vanuatu to deliver a formal ultimatum to Vohor that aid would cut off unless he changed his policies. The prime minister refused to meet the delegation, which nevertheless proceeded to hold a series of high-level meetings and call a press conference in Port Vila.

Australian foreign affairs official Ric Wells told the media: “[W]e have spoken to a wide range of ministers from the Deputy Prime Minister down to members of the Opposition, the

President, [and] we have also spoken to people outside Parliament.” He bluntly declared that Vanuatu had to recognise Beijing, describing any bidding war between China and Taiwan as “destabilising and ultimately bad for any country in question.”

The following day, Downer declared on Australian radio: “I won’t beat about the bush. I am concerned with some of the actions of the Vanuatu government. We’ve laid down some markers to the Vanuatu government about how we think the relationship might go in the future. I suspect on the face of it, the prime minister of Vanuatu won’t much like what we’ve said.”

The Australian intervention provoked a political storm in Vanuatu. On November 28, Vohor’s private secretary Kalvau Moli told the *Vanuatu Daily Post* that the country would not be “blackmailed” by Australia. “We know where Australia’s aid money will be used. (But) from day one, this government has made it clear that it does not want donor countries imposing on us,” he said.

Behind the scenes, support was rapidly slipping away from Vohor. On December 2, six ministers resigned citing disagreements over the recognition of Taiwan. On December 7, China’s ambassador entered the fray accusing Vohor of threatening him with a clenched fist.

In a last ditch attempt to stave off defeat, the parliamentary speaker, Josias Moli, refused to allow the no-confidence motion to be put, citing a recent constitutional amendment. Moli’s decision was quickly challenged in the Supreme Court, which on December 10 overruled the speaker and instructed the parliament to proceed with the vote. The opposition, with the backing of 35 MPs, immediately moved in for the kill, dismissing Vohor in the early hours of December 11.

Back in Australia, Downer received praise in business circles for a job well done. The *Australian Financial Review* published an editorial on December 15 entitled “Pacific action shows results” hailing the results of the Howard government’s aggressive stance throughout the region.

Turning to Vanuatu, the newspaper openly acknowledged Downer’s role in removing Vohor. “This followed the dispatch by Downer of two senior officials to Port Vila to read the riot act as Mr Vohor’s maverick behaviour threatened to end Australian aid and support... This has been and exercise in diplomatic transparency, the carrot clearly followed the stick,” it stated.

The main purpose of the editorial, however, was to urge Howard and Downer not to rest on their laurels but to press ahead with the Australian intervention in Papua New Guinea.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact