Geo-political conflicts overshadow Vanuatu election

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With elections scheduled for March 19, the Pacific Island state of Vanuatu will be at the centre of regional tensions as the imperialist powers, including the US, Australia, Japan and New Zealand, seek to assert their dominance over the country, as part of the deepening economic, diplomatic and military confrontation with China.

The election campaign in the tiny nation, which lies 2,000 kilometres east of Australia and has a population of just 270,000, starts on 2 March. It is the first since a major constitutional crisis in 2015. Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, who is seeking re-election, formed a coalition in the wake of a snap poll called after half the previous government was jailed for corruption. A court ruled that the accused had either given or received payments designed to influence MPs in their capacity as public officials.

Salwai's Reunification of Movements for Change party has survived a full four-year term in office, the first after a decade of unstable coalitions. In a sign of ongoing volatility, however, Salwai is facing a charge of perjury, along with several other high-profile defendants. Radio NZ reported on February 5 that they will appear in court later this month on charges relating to corruption and bribery, aiding and abetting, conflict of interest and perjury.

The case stems from a controversial move by the government to introduce parliamentary secretaries—paid positions that the Supreme Court has ruled "void and of no effect." The opposition called for a criminal investigation into what it deemed were corrupt political appointments. Salwai's spokesperson said the case was a "political ploy" and would not affect his campaign.

According to Radio NZ, Salwai's party is likely to again form the core of the new coalition. This is despite claims that his last government has not met the expectations of the people, including promises of 400 new public service jobs. A 10 percent increase to the minimum wage in September brought it to just $US1.59 per hour. Sections of the working class have threatened strike action, including by parliamentary staff seeking a 25 percent pay rise.

Immediately on the agenda will be the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) which Vanuatu hosts in August. Last year's PIF in Tuvalu was all but derailed over bitter conflicts around climate change and the refusal of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to agree to place limits on coal production.

Writing in the *Guardian* following that event, Vanuatu's Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu warned: "Vanuatu has a message for Australia—we ask that Australia prepares well ahead of the next forum meeting in 2020 and comes to the table ready to make real, tangible commitments on climate change."

Projections forecast an increase in the intensity and frequency of tropical cyclones, such Cyclone Pam which hit Vanuatu in 2015, causing damage equivalent to over 64 percent of GDP. Regenvanu declared that if Canberra is not prepared to help Pacific nations address the existential climate crisis it needs to decide if it wants "a seat at the [PIF] table or not."

Vanuatu is also closely involved in the escalating geo-political tensions across the Pacific as the Trump administration and its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, intensify preparations for war with China.

Last week, an Australian naval ship, the HMAS Leeuwin, docked at a Chinese-built wharf in Vanuatu's northern town of Luganville for a three-day visit. The wharf was previously the subject of an alarmist Australian media beat-up. Citing unnamed "intelligence and security" sources, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in April 2018 that China had pressured Vanuatu to build a permanent military facility and that it was "a globally significant move that could see the rising superpower sail

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warships on Australia's doorstep."

The Vanuatu government vehemently denied the claims. Regenvanu criticised the Australian media's "paranoia" and declared that, as a non-aligned country, Vanuatu was "not interested in any sort of military base in our country."

As part of its Pacific "Step Up" policy, however, Canberra has upgraded its military operations involving Vanuatu. The recent ship visit is just the latest in a series of Australian navy deployments. Australia's Defence Force has also increased its engagements with Vanuatu's Police Force, alongside training and exercises. Official visits by Morrison to Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands in 2019, and another by Foreign Minister Marise Payne, were the first by an Australian prime minister to Canberra's supposed Pacific "family" in more than a decade.

According to the Melbourne *Age* on February 1, Japan has recently intervened in the Pacific to combat Beijing's growing influence. Japan spent US$1.1 billion on aid and infrastructure projects from 2011–2017, ranking third after Australia ($7.5 bn) and New Zealand ($1.5 bn). China came fourth, with $1.28 bn, but in 2017 Beijing increased its Pacific commitments to $4.78 bn, prompting alarm in both Canberra and Washington.

Director of Japan's ministry of foreign Affairs, Maya Hamada, told the *Age* that Tokyo's Pacific engagement is "supporting the rule of law, freedom of navigation and pursuit of peace and prosperity," including opposition to "attempts to change the status quo." The language echoes that used by Washington to invoke its dominance in the Pacific in the period following its victory in World War II.

Vanuatu is a major recipient of foreign aid. China's contribution, at $99.65 million, is Beijing's largest to any single Pacific country, exceeding that from Australia ($53.91 million) and Japan ($29.97 million) combined. Private Chinese investment, including an 86-hectare apartment and shopping centre development near the capital Port Vila, is also "booming," according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The European Union's new Pacific ambassador Sujiro Seam meanwhile presented his credentials in Port Vila in January, declaring that the EU wants a closer relationship with Vanuatu, covering more than aid and including "gradual integration in the global economy and deepening political dialogue."

Across the region, the issue of so-called "Chinese interference" is playing out in domestic politics, promoting nationalism, xenophobia and racism and boosting the broader war preparations against Beijing.

A scandal erupted in Vanuatu last year over a murky episode in which six Chinese nationals were detained on the premises of a Chinese company with large government contracts. Without access to Vanuatu courts, they were escorted to a waiting aircraft by Chinese and Vanuatu police and deported. Four of the six detainees had earlier successfully applied for Vanuatu citizenship.

The *Vanuatu Daily Post* sharply criticised the government's handling of the affair and the secrecy surrounding it, claiming Beijing had "convinced Vanuatu to enforce Chinese law within its own borders." A *Daily Post* editorial last July accused Minister of Internal Affairs Andrew Napuat, who had given the go-ahead for the operation, of being complicit in illegal acts that had seen citizenship rights stripped away.

In November, Dan McGarry, a Canadian citizen and media director for the *Daily Post*, was denied his work visa renewal. McGarry, who has lived in Vanuatu for 16 years, was unable to board a plane to return from a media freedom conference in Brisbane. The reporter claimed the Vanuatu government was seeking to silence his newspaper's critical reporting about Chinese "influence." The Supreme Court subsequently ruled that the ban denying him re-entry was unlawful.

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