

Vanuatu embroiled in political crisis over Australian security pact

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The small Pacific nation of Vanuatu, 2,600 kilometres northeast of Sydney, has been embroiled in a deepening political crisis involving a dispute over the signing of a security agreement last December with Australia.

An impasse in the sharply divided parliament has forestalled the agreement being formally ratified. Earlier this month, the country's opposition moved to oust Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau, citing "foreign engagement" and the signing of the bilateral agreement as foremost among its grievances.

Vanuatu and other Pacific nations increasingly find themselves at the centre of intensifying geo-strategic rivalry. The agreement was signed by Kalsakau during a regional tour by Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong to advance the US-led campaign to line up Pacific states behind Washington's aggressive confrontation with Beijing.

The broad and vaguely worded agreement cites a determination to "enhance strategic engagement" between the two countries, a phrase that opens the door for almost anything. It provides vast scope for a range of military activities directed against China.

The document also foreshadows an expanded Australian military presence in Vanuatu, stating: "Where the Parties have mutually determined that a mutual security activity requires the presence of Australian Defence Force, Australian Federal Police or Australian Border Force personnel in Vanuatu, the Parties shall facilitate such a presence."

The deal was considered a significant strategic victory for Canberra, which has been working to buttress its position as the region's military "partner of choice." The US and Australia are determined to prevent any repeat of China's 2022 security pact with the Solomon Islands, to which Washington responded with barely disguised threats of military intervention.

Vanuatu's opposition leader Bob Loughman, however,

has accused the government of compromising Vanuatu's "neutral" status that could jeopardise development assistance from China, the country's biggest external creditor. As prime minister in June 2022, Loughman signed agreements on economic technology, medical and health care, and marine economy with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the latter's tour of the region.

There is long-standing opposition to any security deal with Canberra. In January 2019, ahead of a visit by Australia's then prime minister, Scott Morrison, to open an Australian-funded police academy, Vanuatu's foreign minister Ralph Regenvanu flatly warned there would be no prospect of a change in Vanuatu's "non-aligned" status. He said Vanuatu was not interested in an exclusive security treaty with any one country.

Some Vanuatu government parliamentarians have also expressed reservations about the deal, claiming the prime minister signed it without sufficient consultation. Loughman's no confidence motion declared that the "independence and impartiality" of the Pacific nation was being compromised" and that the security pact with Australia was progressed without authorisation from the Council of Ministers.

When the motion finally came to a parliamentary vote on August 16, the opposition claimed victory with 26 votes in the 52-member House, while the government got 23 votes. There was one abstention, from the speaker. One seat is vacant and another was empty with the MP overseas.

Under Vanuatu's constitution an absolute majority is needed to oust a prime minister, which has been interpreted to mean 27 MPs in the 52-member parliament. Kalsakau was initially declared winner by speaker Seoule Simeon. The opposition argued the decision was undemocratic given they had the support of more members on the day, whereupon Simeon urged the opposition to seek redress in the courts.

Last Friday the Supreme Court upheld the opposition's challenge and declared the no-confidence motion was valid. The court declared a stay in proceedings to allow an appeal, which is likely to go ahead this week. Meanwhile, according to the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, the opposition bloc is planning another no confidence vote against both Kalsakau and the Speaker.

The political crisis in Vanuatu is another sign of the escalating tensions across the Pacific as the imperialist powers drive up the pressure for even the smallest and most remote states to fall into line.

US and Australian strategic think tanks have long warned of growing Chinese influence in Vanuatu. In 2004 Vanuatu's then prime minister Ham Lini reversed a controversial decision to establish diplomatic links with Taiwan instead of China and remained committed to Beijing. In 2018 and 2019, Australian media furiously alleged that China was seeking to establish a naval base in the country, only to subsequently claim that Beijing had scuttled the plans due to their public exposures.

Vanuatu's growing strategic significance was again highlighted last month when France's president Emmanuel Macron visited the capital Port Vila, the first visit by a sitting president. Macron made a pitch for increasing French influence in the region, denouncing "new imperialism" in the Pacific, referring to China, calling it a threat to the "sovereignty" of smaller states.

There is widespread resentment over the pressure being exerted by the actual imperialist powers, including Australia, the US and France, which have regarded the Pacific as their backyard for more than a century.

Earlier this month Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare boycotted a meeting with two US Congress representatives who turned up in Honiara expecting to be granted an audience. Neal Dunn of US House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party and Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen posted a photo of themselves stranded in an empty airport carpark after they were given the cold shoulder by local authorities.

China is maintaining its own presence. Last week a group of Chinese police experts arrived in Port Vila. At a welcoming ceremony attended by Kalsakau and China's ambassador, Li Minggang, the prime minister declared the contingent would "greatly enhance the ability of the Vanuatu police to maintain social order." A similar police presence has been established in the Solomon Islands since US-backed anti-China riots erupted in the capital in 2021.

Last week the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), consisting of the prime ministers of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Vanuatu and the president of the pro-independence Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) of New Caledonia, met in Port Vila—the first full in-person meeting since the COVID pandemic.

The MSG's director-general Leonard Louma said the battle for influence by the global superpowers "impels the region to take sides, but it does not protect Melanesia and the region." He continued: "There are some who would like us to believe that taking sides in that geopolitical posturing is in our best interest. May I hasten to add... it is not in our best interest to take sides."

The statement expresses a forlorn hope. While Sogavare has oriented more firmly towards China following a week-long diplomatic trip to Beijing in July, PNG and Fiji are tied to military pacts with the US and its allies.

The US military has been given "unimpeded access" to key PNG defence facilities, including the joint PNG-Australia Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, as part of a sweeping 15-year joint Defence Cooperation Agreement. It includes surveillance, reconnaissance activities, bunkering of vessels and the staging and deploying of forces. PNG is also negotiating a security agreement with Canberra.

In June Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka signed an agreement providing for New Zealand and Fijian military forces "to effectively cooperate within each other's territories." Rabuka is "readjusting" relations away from China, threatening to cancel a 2011 police training and exchange agreement with Beijing.



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