

## Program 5: After Independence – What Happened?

**Since independence, Pacific island nations have faced the challenges of poor economic management, youth unemployment, urban drift, coups and conflict. Leaders have struggled with issues of economic sustainability, national integrity and integration into global economies. As new elites emerge, governments have found it hard to meet popular expectations. How do Pacific Islanders assess the situation after independence?**

PEARSON VETUNA: Hello, I'm Pearson Vetuna. This is 'Time to Talk'.

BERNARD NAROKOBI: Time of independence is like a time of courtship and marriage. In courtship of course the husband and the wife to be have a lot of dreams and visions and when children begin to come along, they have to face the realities of feeding, financing, educating, clothing, housing and real problems develop.

VETUNA: Bernard Narokobi from Papua New Guinea.

Today in our series on governance issues in the Pacific we explore what happened after independence.

SUSAN SETAE: Well firstly we are beginning to recognise one another as one people, one country. We are of diverse culture and we are of diverse languages and the feeling of oneness that is greatly achieved and we are very happy about that.

VETUNA: Susan Setae, President of Papua New Guinea's National Council of Women.

SUSAN SETAE: The sad part is that we have seen that the country economically has not proved to our own people, to ourselves, that we are capable of managing our own nation. Because our health services speak for it - no medicine, no doctors, the infant mortality rate is high, maternal mortality rate is very high, nutrition bad and the school buildings have deteriorated. So people have not really seen the evidence of development. We are beginning to see that we are incapable of looking after ourselves. We have produced very well-educated people but we have poor leaders.

NAPOLEON LIOSI: Our problem, in my view, has been poor management of the economy by those that are installed with trust to manage the economy of the country, namely the government. When I say government, I mean successive governments, successive prime ministers all have had a hand in this. So the problem of management or mismanagement of our economy had something to do with a rich nation becoming a beggar.

VETUNA: Napoleon Liosi, from the Public Employees' Association of Papua New Guinea. Since he joined the union movement in the early 1970s, he has observed an increasing politicisation of the

public service - which, he believes, is another factor in the decline of good governance.

**NAPOLEON LIOSI:** The sensitivity of the system of government, namely the public service has been destroyed through political interferences - appointment of political cronies without merit to public offices, and I'm talking about senior public officers. So political appointment in my view has destroyed or has undermined the good government system we had enjoyed before Independence where the government was for the people, by the people. We've lost that, and once you destabilise your government system, namely the public service, you've lost everything because delivery of goods and services become dreams and like every other dream they come whilst you are asleep.

**VETUNA:** Papua New Guinea and several other Pacific countries decentralised their government systems after independence.

Provincial governments were set up in an attempt to defuse demands for autonomy from some islands and provinces over the loss of control of their own resources and concerns they were not getting a fair deal.

But the provincial government system over time proved cumbersome and costly to run.

Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu attempted to reform their provincial and local government systems in the 1990s. But have the reforms been successful? Former Premier of the Western Highlands Province, Phillip Kapal.

**PHILIP KAPAL:** Reform system has got nothing in it, it's just a name They made it so big and made it so fast, somebody were in a rush really, and now reforms are not working. Local level governments are not getting their allocation, the funds, the money. You see you can set up an organisation but if that organisation does not have the money, how can it run? Nothing will move, so all these districts now they're handicapped because funds are being controlled in Waigani. Provincial governments have no say in the revenue, the money is held in Waigani. They might as well control in Waigani and do away with the other two systems of government, local and provincial governments, because it's really hopeless. You see the gut of the matter is money and money does not come.

**VETUNA:** A quarter of a century after independence, there is much focus on what went wrong. Nevertheless there have been significant achievements.

Bernard Narokobi, one of the architects of the Papua New Guinea Constitution.

**BERNARD NAROKOBI:** Yes there is a great deal of disillusionment, disappointment but at the same time the good things that have been achieved are often not recognised. We've established a nation. It's a free democratic nation with one constitution, common law which everyone accepts. The good roads that are now being put or have been put into Port Moresby, many roads that are being sealed around the country, the school systems embracing - especially the higher level schools,

universities - embracing information technology and accepting the free market world economies. These are many good things.

**VETUNA:** Most Pacific island nations face inherent constraints to their development. Rick Hou is Governor of the Solomon Islands Reserve Bank.

**RICK HOU:** Geographically we are a very small country. The country itself is very scattered which makes communication and transportation quite a challenge for any government. You know shipping and communication in Solomon Islands is still an uphill battle in terms of getting to our remote islands and getting them integrated in our communication systems. But also Solomon Islands trade with European markets, Japanese markets and other Asian markets, these markets are quite far away from us here in terms of the shipping routes. Also, we are very susceptible to natural disasters. Cyclones are always affecting this country. Also, we are very susceptible to external market factors, for example fluctuation in prices. Whatever happens in the outside world unfortunately affects us very quickly.

**SIR PETER KENILOREA:** Another important and very difficult situation that Solomon Islands faces and I'm sure other Pacific islands face too is that whilst there is a government, the government does not own resources.

**VETUNA:** Solomon Island's first Prime Minister, Sir Peter Kenilorea.

**SIR PETER KENILOREA:** The ownership of the resources - important resources, sea and land based - are in the hands of so-called customary ownership. And so you are planning to utilise someone else's resources all the time and I found that even today the difficulty of that is still very much evident. The land tenure system is such that it's owned tribally. Try to get any economic development on such land is alienation of that piece of land from the tribe, which to them is not a done thing. It's part of them and it's always been very difficult.

**VETUNA:** In addition to land tenure issues, Melanesian nations also have to bring together people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Bernard Narokobi again.

**BERNARD NAROKOBI:** You face the democratic and the cultural problems of ethnicity, wantokism. You face the cultural problem of language. You face the cultural problem of family affinities and family ties on the one hand and you have these modern democracies based on political parties - party with the big numbers governs.

**VETUNA:** And quite often the numbers game seems to prevail over policy implementation. Politicians - once they get into power - become more concerned about their political survival than the needs and interests of their constituents.

Edward Natapei became Prime Minister of Vanuatu in 2001.

EDWARD NATAPEI: It's one of the reasons that we've had so many changes in our governments over a fairly short period of time because we came to a stage where leaders were more concerned about being re-elected. To do that, they felt that you had to be a government minister to be able to secure funding for projects for your own people, thus secure your seat as a member of parliament. So I think that has worked against our country because we have a lot of islands and different languages and the minute you start dividing people to their own groups, you end up with the country so fragmented that political leaders tend to move to where they feel more comfortable. And that has caused a problem for this country.

VETUNA: Another factor of instability as well as a sign of democracy at work is the growing number of political parties since independence. However political fragmentation is not driven by ideological differences as Edward Natapei explains.

EDWARD NATAPEI: Political parties in Vanuatu do not travel in different directions. We tend to be going down the same road apart from policies in relation to land which are slightly different, but otherwise all our policies seem to be going in the same direction. As a result it's very easy for someone to cross the floor to the other party and still continue to be serving his people with the policies that are very similar to his own political party.

VETUNA: One of the consequences of political dysfunction is lack of development in the rural areas. This has forced people to move to urban centres in their quest for jobs and better living conditions.

The reality is that job prospects are limited, and many find themselves in squatter settlements trying to make a living.

Ephraim Kalsakau, General Secretary of the National Workers Union in Vanuatu says the urban drift problem needs to be addressed urgently.

EPHRAIM KALSAKAU: Since Independence, development has been centred around Vila so you find people moving to Vila in the hope of finding jobs, and also the young people move to Vila for brighter lights. I've seen Vila grow from being a cattle field to what it is now. The population of greater Vila is now around 40,000. And with the current problems we have, it's a boiling kettle.

[Children singing]

VETUNA: Children from Seaside Tongoa, one of the oldest settlements around Port Vila.

DANIEL LUKAI: In this area there are many island communities. Here it's Tongoa, then Paama, then we have Futuna, so many islands from Seaside area.

VETUNA: Daniel Lukai, an unemployed youth who ran a three-month literacy program for the kids of the settlement whose families cannot afford school fees.

DANIEL LUKAI: I try to share what I have learnt at school to the kids but many of them they left school, they didn't complete their education. They just play around, go fishing down there. They are very smart, but I see that for a three-months program like this, three months is not enough.

VETUNA: This is 'Time to Talk' on Radio Australia and Radio National - today 'After Independence - What happened?'

[Archives of Rabuka coup in 1987]

NEWSREADER: ABC News, the latest on the coup in Fiji. The military is claiming to be in control of the government after the coup this morning. A caretaker administration is expected to be announced soon to replace the newly elected government of Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra. Mr Bavadra...

VETUNA: Fiji has been rocked by three coups since independence in 1970 - all in the name of indigenous Fijian rights. There was growing discontent within the Fijian community, which felt marginalised economically. However, this was only one of the complex combination of factors which led to the crisis.

Satendra Prasad, founding member of the Citizens' Constitutional Forum in Fiji.

SATENDRA PRASAD: The politics and the language of politics appears to be one in which the claim is made that poverty is somehow the monopoly of one community. That is one side. The second side there are inequities in commerce, in the ownership of small enterprise, of medium size enterprise by Fiji standards. These are enterprises employing about 50-100 people etc. It is highly desirable that in a country like this that the ownership of industry and commerce etc., that the communities are able to participate equally. So there's these two sides of that coin. But in the ethnic bargaining approach that we have taken certainly as a consequence of the 1987 coup and the way in which we have been polarised, it ignores entirely the fact that both communities have a very large proportion of very poor people.

VETUNA: There were also growing fears about the political dominance of the Indo-Fijian community.

The May 1987 coup, followed the ground-breaking election victory a month earlier of a coalition which for the first time since independence reflected the multi-racial character of the nation.

The events led to a review of the constitution adopted at Independence. This gave birth to the 1990 Constitution which guaranteed the political supremacy of the Fijians.

Tomasi Vakatora was one of three commissioners involved in the lengthy review of this racially biased constitution.

**TOMASI VAKATORA:** I think there is a group of loud voiced people in Fiji who believe that the guarantee is not enough. As people would talk about sovereign rights of the Fijian people, what are these rights? Can they elaborate because the land is protected, their custom is protected, they are able to appoint a Head of State in this country. They are not barred from any other office, so what is the right? Is it running into a shop and kick the glass window and take out the goods inside? Is that walking into a place and say: "I take over this place, if not I will blow your head"? Is that the sort of right? They're not coming up with any right because as far as I know, and I work hard for these in the Constitution of 1997, as far as I know the rights were there, the protective rights. No one can take away their land, their custom or their religion, what they revere most. So I don't know what rights are these people talking about but I suspect they might want at least more than half of the ministers of the Cabinet to be Fijians, including the Prime Minister. Well then why not say so? Why hide behind this skirt of sovereign right?

**VETUNA:** Ratu Meli Vesikula, now an advocate for reconciliation between the two communities, was a staunch nationalist in 1987.

**RATU MELI VESIKULA:** I was blind to politicians you know taking advantage of the situation, stirring the emotions of the Fijian people you know in 1987 and I along with many thousands felt that and I became involved in that way. But of course I was disappointed when I found out that the people who planned and stage-managed the whole thing in 1987 had no vision, you know. Well to put it crudely did not care really for the masses of the Fijian people, they were out there for wealth, for control, for power.

**VETUNA:** Indigenous Fijian rights and ethnic tensions were again prominent features in the third coup in May 2000.

Satendra Prasad again.

**SATENDRA PRASAD:** What has happened quite clearly is that we have become very polarised again, people who held the middle ground have retreated into their ethnic enclaves. And this is the very nature of a conflict that takes on an ethnic dimension whether it's real or whether it's part of the perception. It is safer to go back into their ethnic enclave, and there are too many penalties for coming out of an ethnic enclave because then you're not part of the group, and if you're not part of the group then there's community pressure. There might also be economic cost to that and so on. So this type of thing has happened again. We've seen the wastefulness that has affected all communities quite equally I would say, and perhaps the community that has lost most after 1987 has been the indigenous Fijian community in whose name the grab for power and everything else occurred over the last decade. And I think quite a few people see that this time and perhaps our healing and reconciliation and rebuilding might be accelerated and in fact in a shorter period of time.

VETUNA: Next week in 'Time to Talk', we look at the governance agenda and how it is perceived in Pacific countries. And don't forget to visit our website at [abc.net.au/timetotalk](http://abc.net.au/timetotalk)

I'm Pearson Vetuna. Bye for now.

## Program Participants:

- Pearson Vetuna, Executive Producer of the Tok Pisin Service at Radio Australia
- Bernard Narokobi, Speaker of Papua New Guinea's Parliament, and author of "The Melanesian Way"
- Susan Setae, President of the National Council of Women of Papua New Guinea
- Napoleon Liosi, General Secretary of the Public Employees Association of Papua New Guinea
- Phillip Kapal, former Premier of the Western Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea
- Rick Hou, Governor of the Solomon Islands Reserve Bank
- Sir Peter Kenilorea, the Solomon Island's first Prime Minister
- Edward Natapei became Prime Minister of Vanuatu in 2001
- Daniel Lukai, unemployed youth worker from the Seaside Tongoa settlement in Port Vila, Vanuatu
- Satendra Prasad, founding member of the Citizens' Constitutional Forum in Fiji
- Tomasi Vakatora, member of the 1995 Reeves Commission, which reviewed Fiji's Constitution
- Ratu Meli Vesikula supported Fiji's Taukei movement in 1987, but is now a member of the Citizens' Constitutional Forum