

1998, joined forces with opposition leaders to run on a platform of anti-corruption, transparency, and accountability.

In nearly every way this election broke new ground. Unlike elections of the past, votes were tallied in public and at record speed, and the nation's radio station broadcast results throughout the night. Individuals used the Internet to spread the news instantly across the ocean, on a near hourly basis. Winning a majority of seats, even those of four of six long-term cabinet ministers, the United Democratic Party gained control of the *Nitijela* (parliament).

Most surprising were the defeats of Ministers Tony deBrum (Finance), and Phillip Muller (Foreign Affairs and Trade), both four-term officials who in previous elections garnered top numbers of Majuro votes. As the dominant leaders of the nation, particularly since Amata Kabua's death in 1996, their defeat points to the extreme dissatisfaction of Majuro voters, who elected opposition leaders in record numbers, most notably Wilfred Kendall and Witten Philippo. In other seats, even first-time politicians were elected over incumbents, including some of traditional *iroij* (chief) status. John Silk beat Iroij Mamoru Kabua (Ebon Atoll), Abacca Anjain-Maddison won against Minister Johnsay Riklon (Rongelap), and Mike Konelios defeated Lomes McKay (Maloe-lap). Senator Anjain-Maddison is the only woman to currently serve in the *Nitijela*.

In January, the *Nitijela* unanimously elected as its president Kessai Note, a third-term senator and former Speaker from Bikini. The nation's first commoner to serve as president, Note

MARSHALL ISLANDS

The Republic of the Marshall Islands' most dramatic political upheaval occurred in November 1999 with the first national election of the post-Amata Kabua era. The governing party, in power since constitutional government began in 1979, was rejected by Marshall Islanders and replaced by the former opposition party. The United Democratic Party, a coalition of former ministers ousted by Imata Kabua in the aftermath of the defeat of gambling legislation in

distinguishes himself by shunning the title His Excellency and driving his own car. Yet, he maintains the respect of his past opponents. During the presidential nomination process, Imata Kabua, in a conciliatory gesture, closed the process after Note's nomination (*MIJ*, 7 Jan 2000, 21). Note's prior position as Speaker was filled by Iroj and Senator Litokwa Tomeing; his ten-member cabinet consists of eight new ministers, including three who are first time senators.

Two significant events prior to the elections provided fuel for United Democratic Party fire. First, the government party had once again boycotted the August 1999 session of the *Nitijela*. United Democratic Party members appeared daily, despite the government party's absence. The politicians' absences angered constituents, particularly public sector employees. When the session ended without the quorum required to pass a national budget for fiscal year 2000, antagonisms only grew. Second, hospital workers organized in protest of political interference in the hiring and firing of hospital administrators and employees (*MIJ*, 3 Sept 1999, 1). In the nation's first strike, the government's initial reactions were to fire hospital leaders and threaten other workers' jobs. In response, health-care workers gathered outside the nation's capital to hold signs and banners calling for the resignation of the health minister and reform of the Public Service Commission.

No news of the strike was broadcast on national radio, but word of it spread rapidly. Ultimately the strikers sought a compromise with the health minister. The strike was unprecedented for the public expression of discontent

and the direct attack on particular government leaders. The absence of serious repercussions for those involved strengthened the resolve of a general public often reluctant to directly express criticism, particularly of powerful government leaders. The strike is an extended example of what began during the gambling legislation debates of 1998 as an organized public outcry against the will of a few dominant individuals (Walsh 1999).

The shift in political power and the focus on accountability has strengthened the trend of greater public acknowledgment of silent but well-known examples of prior political influence. In short, the nation began airing its dirty laundry, even as the first US Government Accounting Office audit of the use of compact funds revealed the fiscal results of that influence. The previous government had maintained the position that US funding is not aid, and thus US oversight of funding provided in a bilateral agreement is an insult to the nation's sovereignty (*MIJ*, 5 Nov 1999, 26).

The new government has attempted to pursue transgressors; for example, the statute of limitations on crimes was extended from three to six years in the January session of the *Nitijela* (*MIJ*, 2 Feb 2000, 9). Further, leaders are keeping their campaign promises. Nearly every government agency contains a newly formed or reformed board of directors and administrator, particularly those agencies with severe fiscal problems, including the Marshall Islands Social Security Administration, Air Marshall Islands, the Marshalls Electric Company, and the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (*MIMRA*). In many cases

people holding government positions are prohibited from board membership.

The new government has also instituted and enforced a government-vehicle policy, unheard of in past years, that requires government vehicles to be compounded at night and prohibits family members of officials from driving them (*MIJ*, 14 Feb 2000, 1). It is strengthening the relationship with the Asian Development Bank by continuing with the final reduction-in-force recommendation that has reduced the size of government by 30 percent since the mid-nineties. Transportation, fisheries, outer-island development, an independent judiciary, education, and accountability are, to date, the key areas of interest of this new government.

Options for transportation to Hawai'i increased on 2 September when Aloha Airlines began service to Johnston Atoll, Majuro, and Kwajalein. Continental later followed suit, resuming a third weekly flight through Majuro. Additionally, PM&O Shipping Line added an extra trip to the islands, increasing service between Hawai'i and Majuro to every two weeks (*MIJ*, 13 Aug 1999, 1).

Increased attention to inter-atoll transportation by the new government convinced Air Marshall Islands board members to back out of a \$30 million deal for two Dornier planes, made by the previous government, in favor of smaller, more efficient aircraft.

The governments of Japan and Taiwan have committed funds for boat purchases so fish and copra from outer islands can be delivered to Majuro more efficiently. In 1999 copra production was discouraged by the limitation of a single functioning

vessel available for collection. Copra production decreased 38 percent from 1997 to 1999 (*MIJ*, 16 July 1999, 1; 2 Feb 2000, 2).

Fisheries developments have greatly affected the nation in 1999–2000. Eighty percent of the 322 jobs created at the new Majuro PM&O fish loining facility that opened in November 1999 went to women (*MIJ*, 18 Feb 1999, 24; 3 March 2000, 22). The increase in purse seiners (65 percent from Taiwan) using Majuro as a transshipment center contributed \$5 million to MIMRA through fees in addition to adding to the local economy via fuel and provisions purchased on Majuro. Between October 1998 and September 1999, 266 purse seiners had stopped in Majuro lagoon. Residents felt their impact economically and environmentally, with traces of oil beginning to appear on the small islands of the atoll (*MIJ*, 28 Jan 2000, 28; 17 Sept 1999, 1).

Arno Atoll has produced world-class pearls for locally owned Robert Reimers Enterprises. With twenty-eight potential atoll sites the Marshall Islands has excellent potential to expand this great revenue earner, following the example of the Cook Islands, where three atolls produce \$30–40 million in pearls annually (*MIJ*, 17 March 2000, 15).

The Marshall Islands Judiciary has been especially busy, and was commended by President Note for its landmark decision in July–August of 1999, ruling that the previous government's boycott in the *Nitijela* of the fall 1998 vote of no confidence was unconstitutional and illegal. The landmark ruling resulted in a shift in political power, though a bit too late for Chief Justice Dan Cadra, whose contract

was terminated by the previous administration after the court ruling. The Marshall Islands Bar Association responded by noting that “three times in four years a Chief Justice has been removed from office” (*MIJ*, 25 June 1999, 19).

Above all recent court battles looms the upcoming tobacco trial, the nation’s first civil jury trial, set for April 2001. The Marshall Islands Government is suing US tobacco companies for more than \$14 billion. US tobacco firms have employed nearly all Majuro’s lawyers against the national government’s claims. The major interest of the Marshall Islands is in bringing the tobacco case to trial, implicitly acknowledging the nation’s sovereignty.

Educators met on Majuro in June 2000 to discuss the state of education in the country. New Minister of Education Wilfred Kendall brings much experience and many ideas to the task of improving the Marshall Islands education system. Standards for teacher training, professional development, and increased parental involvement are being initiated to strengthen student learning environments. Currently only 28 percent of first graders complete high school (*MIJ*, 16 June 2000, 15). The College of the Marshall Islands noted that 80 percent of incoming students test between second- and fourth-grade levels in English and lower than seventh-grade levels in math (*MIJ*, 17 Dec 1999, 1). The college is a shining example of institutional improvement. February’s review by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges resulted in a three-year accreditation status (*MIJ*, 11 Feb 2000, 1).

The Marshall Islands scholarship

board is implementing a collection plan for those who have not completed their studies; of eight hundred college students funded, two hundred have not completed their degrees (*MIJ*, 17 March 2000, 1). As for other agencies and businesses in the islands, the task of collection remains formidable. Even as agencies have difficulty collecting, banks are having record years. The Bank of the Marshall Islands earned a \$1.2 million profit and the Bank of Hawaii was close behind with \$1.1 million (*MIJ*, 14 April 2000).

A national census found a surprising decrease in the population growth rate, from 4.2 percent in the previous census to approximately 1.2 percent. The total population is 50,840, not the anticipated 55,000 to 60,000. Approximately 43 percent of the population is below the age of fifteen, a significant drop from the 50 percent of the last census. The proportion of the population residing in the urban centers of Majuro and Ebeye has increased to 68 percent, one of the most urbanized in the Pacific (*MIJ*, 17 Dec 1999, 3; 3 March 2000, 1).

These statistics reflect the migration of many Marshall Islanders to the United States and the living conditions of those who remain at home. The number of Marshallese children adopted by American families grew so rapidly in the previous two years that the *Nitijela* imposed a moratorium in the last days of the August 1999 session (*MIJ*, 3 Sept 1999). Bill 159, sponsored by Minister of Foreign Affairs Phillip Muller, attempted to halt the adoptions until appropriate legislation could be designed. However, adoptions have likely increased. The number of mothers traveling to

Hawai'i has accelerated, and children are now born or adopted in Honolulu. There is no current count of the total number of children adopted from Hawai'i. Adoption legislation will be among the first items on the *Nitijela's* agenda for August 2000.

Preliminary compact discussions that began in October 1999 on Kaua'i were nullified by the election of a new government nearly a month later. US Chief Negotiator Allen Stayman said talks are on hold until the Marshall Islands completes an accounting of past funds and a long-term strategic plan. Furthermore, the outcome of the November 2000 US elections could alter the course of the negotiations (*MIJ*, 17 March 2000, 8).

As compact talks continued, Kwajalein's major landowners enlisted the well-known law firm of tobacco litigant Richard "Dickie" Scruggs to seek increased payment for the Land Use Agreement with the United States. Payment for the lease of Kwajalein is less than the recent agreement of \$4,000 per acre for the use of Aur Atoll. Addressing US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, lawyers sought direct meetings between US negotiators and Kwajalein landowners. Denial of the request pointed to the government-to-government status of the current agreement. Antagonistic relations between Kwajalein landowners and the RMI government complicate discussions with the United States. Not all major Kwajalein landowners concur about challenging the agreement, which is not due to expire until 2016. Further, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Alvin Jacklick is also a minor landowner on Kwajalein and a leader of the United Democratic Party, which ousted for-

mer president and major Kwajalein landowner Imata Kabua.

Kwajalein is a key site for the development of missile defense technology, and two tests during the year under review revealed inconsistent results. The increased US interest in missile defense bodes well for the Marshalls, and for Marshallese workers at the base, who now have an ombudsman to investigate their complaints.

Declassified documents have shed light on the full extent of the US nuclear testing program in the Marshalls, and Bikini, Enewetak, Utirik, and Rongelap are no longer the only atolls recognized as affected. According to some studies, thyroid-dose exposure estimates associated with the Bravo test may be ten to twenty times higher than was previously thought (*RMI Online*, 18 March 2000). It has also been revealed that thirty-four Rongelapese absent from Rongelap during the Bravo test were "injected with 10 microcuries of chromium 51 and drank water with trace radioactivity" as part of experiments conducted by Brookhaven National Laboratory doctors from 1961 to 1963. These individuals acted as a control group in tests to determine the radiation levels of those downwind of the Bravo tests (*MIJ*, 12 May 2000, 4D).

The Nuclear Claims Tribunal awarded two landmark claims in the period under review. First, the family of a Bikini boy who died of cancer at age eleven was the first to be awarded a full claim for his illness (*MIJ*, 20 Aug 1999, 1). Second, despite its inability to fund the award, the tribunal awarded the people of Enewetak \$341 million, claimed for restoration,

hardship, and loss of land use (*MIJ*, 21 April 1999, 1). The current compensation package under the compact is consistently shown to be inadequate to address both health and land loss claims.

In other foreign affairs, the republic's Korean consul, "Mr Big" Mo Haeng Yong, was arrested for swindling \$88 million from followers of his doomsday cult (*MIJ*, 4 Feb 2000, 1). Yong had planned a \$6 million resort on Mili that was never constructed.

Marshall Islands relations with Taiwan were enhanced by the acceptance of Taiwanese funds that had been put on six-month hold after the elections while the new government investigated rumored Taiwanese campaign involvements. A supplementary budget of \$27.9 million (two-thirds from Taiwan) was passed in the first special session of the *Nitijela* in June 2000 (*MIJ*, 23 June 2000).

In sum, the year has witnessed a turn of the tides in the politics of the Marshall Islands. A new government that promotes accountability, transparency, and fiscal responsibility has taken charge. Young, educated students are returning to work in the government and a youthful hopefulness and optimism is in the air, as long-term opposition leaders and new public servants step into office. Fisheries, tuna transshipment, pearls, and a top-performing maritime registry are generating revenues. Previously marginalized outer-island communities are receiving attention and resources. Citizens are being approached for their ideas, asked about their needs, and having them addressed.

While Imata Kabua and Tom Kijiner (6th term senator) are the sole survivors of the past cast of major players, their allies still represent a threat to the new government. President Note has prohibited his cabinet from traveling during the *Nitijela* session, perhaps because of the precarious majority his party maintains; the potential for a backlash vote of no confidence is carefully measured (*MIJ*, 11 Feb 2000, 24). The fact that this possibility even exists, and that both parties are in the position of struggling to earn or maintain a majority, marks the development of a true parliamentary system.

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