

Vanuatu Political Leaders' Dialogue on Reform

25 – 26 February 2015

KEY OUTCOMES

Leaders and members of political parties, representing 16 political parties in Vanuatu;

Having engaged in dialogue, in a process facilitated by the Commonwealth Secretariat following an invite from the Prime Minister, Hon Joe Natuman, and noting that political instability has continued to impact on the ability of Government to pursue sustainable economic development and growth;

Reached consensus that the following issues needed to be addressed through political cooperation, dialogue and timely implementation within a short to medium-term process of political reform in Vanuatu:

- **Regulation and reduction of motions of no confidence**, with a view to strengthening the stability of government, by:
 - Increasing the proportion of Members required to sign such a motion;
 - Requiring the signing of such a motion to take place at the same time and in the presence of a neutral official (such as the Commissioner of Oaths, with the motion to be handed to the Clerk of Parliament in the presence of the Speaker);
 - Increasing the proportion of Members required to pass such a motion;
 - Introducing a grace period in the first year of the life of a Parliament and in the last year of a Parliament, during which such a motion may not be introduced. A period of 12 months could be considered;
 - Limiting motions of no confidence to only two per year or one motion every six months; and/or

- Providing for a grace period of six months after the election of a new Prime Minister as a result of a motion of no confidence.

Political leaders noted, in particular, that any such restrictions should not limit the fundamental right of Members of Parliament to call for a change in government, and that amendments to the Constitution would likely be required for such restrictions to be introduced in law.

- **Strengthening of political parties**, with a view to consolidating voting patterns and political party affiliation of Members of Parliament, by:
 - Requiring any independent Member of Parliament to affiliate with a political party within two weeks of election;
 - Requiring any Member that fails to support his or her political party with which he is affiliated or changes political party to concede his or her parliamentary seat;
 - Requiring political parties to submit financial returns;
 - Requiring political parties to be registered with minimum criteria as to number of supporters, coverage, and must have a constitution and policies; and/or
 - Providing public funding for political parties.

Political leaders noted, however, that it was important not to restrict the fundamental right of individuals to stand for election.

- **Reform of the electoral system**, with a view to increasing the degree of representativeness of elections, strengthening political parties, and furthering transparency in political financing, by:
 - Introducing a proportional representation list system; or
 - Introducing a preferential constituency vote system.

Political leaders noted, in particular, that further detailed information was needed on different national electoral practices, as well as on the advantages and challenges of electoral systems, including ‘first past the post’, ‘closed-list’ and ‘open-list’ systems. Leaders also noted challenges regarding the integrity of the electoral roll in Vanuatu, as well as limited resources of the Electoral Office.

The Electoral Office was requested to consider the options raised by the Honourable Members and to report back on the best option for Vanuatu to pursue in order to address stability concerns in the country.

Political leaders highlighted that the Electoral Commission should be strengthened and provided with more resources to ensure political integrity of the country’s electoral processes and to provide support and training to political parties.

- **Strengthening parliamentary effectiveness**, by:
 - Strengthening and providing more resources for the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Ministers, and support staff; and/or
 - Providing that the Party with largest number of elected members has the first right to form a government, and if unable to do so within two weeks, that the party with the next largest number shall have the right to form the government.

Political leaders also discussed the election of the Speaker but noted that this was an issue that required further consideration.

- **Extending the life of Parliament**, from four to five years.

NEXT STEPS:

- Leaders and members of political parties agreed that dialogue and actions required could be advanced through the following processes:
 - Identify those actions above that would require a Constitutional amendment and a referendum, together with a possible timeline;
 - Identify the order of priority for implementation of the above actions, taking into account where Constitutional change would be required; and
 - Conduct wider consultation with civil society groups, the private sector, and Chiefs concerning the proposed reforms;
 - Consider approaching Vanuatu's international partners to assist with implementing the above reforms.
- **Commonwealth support:** Political leaders noted the Commonwealth benchmarks for democratic legislatures and the Latimer House Principles, as well as the type of support that the Commonwealth could provide to ongoing efforts to strengthen Vanuatu's democratic processes and institutions.
- **UNDP support:** Political leaders took note of UNDP's parliamentary strengthening support project and how other Parliaments have addressed instability issues through standing orders and strengthening the work of parliamentary committees.

Political leaders expressed their sincere appreciation to the Commonwealth Secretariat for its support in convening and facilitating this important dialogue amongst the Leaders of the political parties to consider options for political and constitutional reform in Vanuatu.

Parliament Chamber

Port Vila, 26 February 2015