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East Asia Review

17 June 1980

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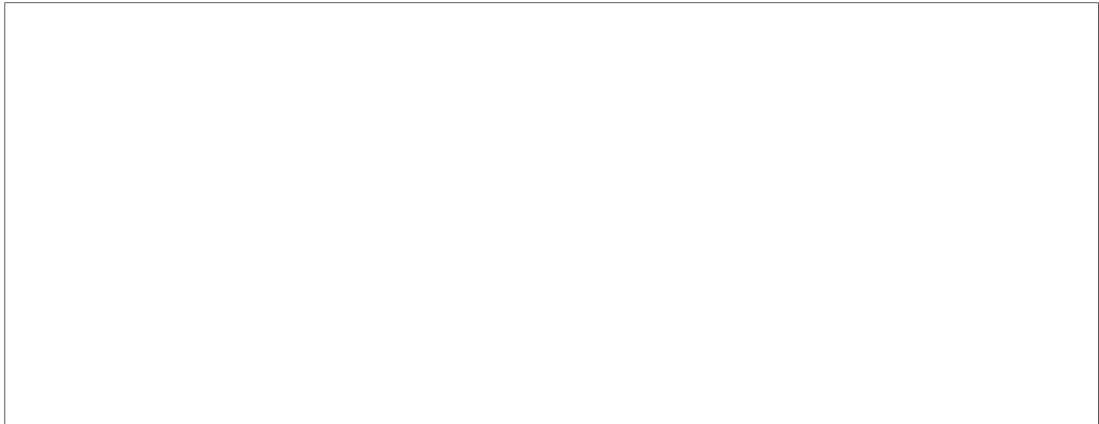


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New Hebrides: South Seas Pandemonium ~~(U)~~

The secessionist movement in the New Hebrides underscores the seemingly unbridgeable internal divisions that face the South Pacific territory as it approaches independence as the new nation of Vanuatu.

Governed jointly by the British and the French as a condominium for the past 74 years, the colony has separate British and French education, judicial, postal, and police systems, as well as two currencies. The task of creating unified national institutions from this chaotic arrangement is compounded by a cleavage between British-oriented and French-oriented islanders that poses an almost insurmountable obstacle to fostering a sense of nationhood.

The British-French dichotomy among the islanders was solidified last November by local elections for a government that would lead the condominium into independence. The landslide victory of the English speaking Vanuaaku Party added to the concern of outnumbered French-speaking islanders for their position after the colonial administrators departed. Although the French-oriented Na Griamel Party threatened secession of its island stronghold of Espiritu Santo, it held off in the belief that France would continue to drag its feet on independence. France's grudging agreement in late May to the 30 July independence date set by the island assembly pushed Na Griamel--backed by French planters--to announce on 28 May the secession of Santo, largest in the New Hebrides chain.

Faced with a lack of police forces to quell the rebellion, the central government of Father Walter Lini, an Anglican priest who will become Prime Minister and who has been accused of being vaguely leftist, has attempted to isolate Santo by cutting communications and supplies. The British and French have moved in police and military reinforcements but have shown indecision and lack of cooperation in confronting the rebellion.

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Advice and money from the Phoenix Foundation, a free-enterprise organization of US business opportunists, have encouraged the rebels to continue defiance. Members of the foundation have been involved for several years in questionable land speculation schemes in the New Hebrides. They have found Na Grial leader Jimmy Stevens, a charismatic individual of part European background, a willing tool for their ambition to establish a tax-free and regulation-free business haven on Santo.

The French have long been uncooperative toward British efforts to devise a more rational form of government for the condominium and have been accused of encouraging the rebellion by both the Lini government and the local British administration. To counter this impression, Paris has assured Lini of its disapproval of the separatists and of its intention to provide aid to the New Hebrides after independence.

Last week the resident French commissioner flew to Santo to persuade Stevens to negotiate. Although Stevens reportedly agreed to talks with the Lini government and British and French authorities, his subsequent announcement that the Na Grial Party would open an information office in Paris suggests that he is not willing to come to terms. A resurfacing of separatist agitation on Tanna island--apparently unconnected to that on Santo--at the opposite end of the archipelago further clouds the New Hebrides' prospects of attaining independence next month.

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