

Governance Series | Part One of Six

Why Vanuatu leads the way it does: Our history still shapes our leadership today

By Gregoire Nimbtik

As VANUATU CELEBRATES ITS 46TH anniversary of Independence, many people are asking the same question: Why do we continue to face the same political and governance challenges?

Recent discussions following the findings of the Public Accounts Committee have sparked strong public debate. Social media has been filled with concerns about leadership, accountability, corruption and the performance of government institutions. While these discussions are important, the answers cannot be found by looking only at today's politics. To understand our present, we must first understand our past.

The way Vanuatu is governed today did not develop overnight. It is the result of hundreds of years of history that shaped our leaders, our institutions and the way we think about government. Our system has been influenced by customary leadership, Christian missions, colonial rule, the Anglo-French Condominium, our rich cultural diversity and the struggle for independence. These historical experiences continue to influence how we lead, make decisions and work together as a nation.

History is more than a record of past events. It helps us understand why our institutions operate the way they do and why some national challenges continue from one generation to another. By understanding our history, we are better equipped to shape the future we want for Vanuatu.

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 inhabited islands spread across the South Pacific. It is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world, with more than 110 distinct languages and dialects spoken by a population of just over 300,000 people. While this diversity is one of our greatest strengths, it has also influenced how communities have developed, governed themselves and related to one another throughout history.

Leadership before government

Long before Europeans arrived, every community in Vanuatu had its own system of leadership. Chiefs were respected leaders responsible for maintaining peace, resolving disputes, managing land and protecting cultural traditions. Leadership was closely connected to custom, family relationships and community wellbeing.

However, there was no



single customary system across the islands. Every island—and often every village—had its own customs, traditions and governance arrangements. Leadership structures differed from place to place, reflecting the extraordinary diversity that still characterises Vanuatu today.

Custom was more than tradition; it was the law that guided everyday life. It established rights and responsibilities, governed marriage, land ownership, resource management and conflict resolution, and taught respect for elders and chiefs. These rules were not written down. They were passed from one generation to the next through oral tradition and community practice.

Before European contact, travel between islands was limited by geography, language differences and the lack of modern transport. As a result, communities developed largely independently, creating the remarkable variety of languages, customs and governance systems that exist today.

The arrival of foreign traders

The first Europeans who arrived were mainly traders looking for valuable natural resources such as sandalwood. Their interest was commercial rather than cultural. In many cases, local people were exploited, and some were taken from the islands to work overseas as forced labourers.

These experiences created mistrust between island communities and the newcomers. What could have become peaceful trading relationships often developed into conflict. Competition over land, labour and natural resources led to violence that disrupted traditional life across many communities.

The arrival of Europeans also introduced new tools and weapons. Guns, knives and axes gradually replaced many traditional tools. While these new technologies changed everyday life, they also intensified conflicts between communities, making disputes more destructive than they had been before. The effects were felt not only in population numbers but also in traditional leadership structures and community stability.

Missionaries changed society

The second major wave of foreign influence came through Christian missionaries. Unlike traders, missionaries came to spread Christianity and establish more peaceful communities. They faced enormous hardship, with some losing their lives through disease and conflict, but they remained committed to their mission.

Their influence extended well beyond religion. Missionaries introduced three institutions that transformed life across the islands—churches, schools and basic health services. These became the foundations of education, healthcare and community development in many parts of the country and continue to influence Vanuatu today.

Education became one of the most powerful tools of change. Catholic missions generally taught in French, while Protestant missions taught in English. Over time, these different education systems reflected the growing rivalry between France and Britain and laid the foundations for the English-speaking and

French-speaking communities that continue to shape national politics today.

Religious affiliation increasingly influenced not only where children went to school but also how communities identified themselves politically and culturally. Families often attended the schools linked to their church, reinforcing linguistic and social divisions across the country.

Today, Vanuatu is home to 88 church denominations, including ten major denominations. This reflects the country's rich religious diversity but also adds another layer to its already complex social landscape. Together with more than 110 indigenous languages and two official colonial languages, this diversity remains both a source of national strength and an ongoing challenge for building unity around common national goals.

Looking back to move forward

Understanding this history is important because it explains why leadership and governance in Vanuatu are often more complex than

they appear. Our leaders do not operate in a vacuum. They inherit traditions, institutions and expectations that have developed over centuries.

Customary leadership, Christianity and modern government continue to exist side by side. Each has contributed enormously to our nation. Yet they also bring different values, responsibilities and ways of making decisions. One of Vanuatu's greatest challenges has been finding the right balance between these systems while building a united and effective state.

Author's note:This is the first article in a six-part series. In the next article, we will examine one of the most influential periods in our history—the Anglo-French Condominium. We will explore how two colonial governments ruled one country at the same time and how that unique system left a legacy that still shapes our politics, public institutions and national development today.

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