The Recent Developments in Vanuatu Politics/Government.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honored to be asked to address you on this rare occasion as somebody coming from Vanuatu. Let me begin by setting a scene for you regarding the topic which I will be talking on, “The Recent Political Development in Vanuatu Politics/Government.” Before independence, The New Hebrides was run by three administrations – the British, French and Joint Administrations. These tri-pitted arrangement was called Condominium, so that the British and the French ran their own separate services such as Education, Health, Police etc. whilst the Joint Administration was mainly concerned with Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries etc. These arrangements did not cater for localization, except the British, who were trying their best to implement certain amounts of localization. When New Hebrides became independent, we were faced with unifying the three administrations with the problems of having enough educated people to run these administrations and simultaneously harmonizing the scarce man power resources we had in order to form one single independent administration. The Vanua’aku Party at this stage had mainly English speakers who had been through the British Administration and experienced the type of Administration that would likely be adopted in the independent New Hebrides. However, the rest of the politicians in Vanuatu, were the people who reacted negatively to Vanua’aku Party’s call for independence and were in opposition because they did not think that they were ready to run an independent nation. This meant that any democratically elected future government, which should practice good governance, transparency, accountability, non-nepotism and diplomacy etc. could not be run efficiently by such people, who never thought themselves ready in the beginning. This has meant that the country’s recent Comprehensive Reform Program is being undermined, and certain aspects of this program are being ignored or manipulated, in order to satisfy the individualistic politicians who are currently in power.

Vanua’aku Party with it’s 11 years government after independence was stable because it had its majority and most people in that first 11 years knew what good governance was all about due to the British influence.
When I was asked to give this talk, I was to begin from the most recent Snap Elections that took place in Vanuatu in July of last year, 2004. However, I think that in order to really understand what happened, and is still happening in the country, we need to go back to how this track of instability in recent Vanuatu politics began. In order to do that, I would like to begin with the 2002 General Elections.

The Vanua’aku Pati has for a long time dominated politics in Vanuatu. If something happens to rock the stability of this Party, then it has a rippling effect on all the political institutions within the country. In the 2002 elections, the Party suffered a fall in the number of Parliament members it gained in 1997, from 19 members to 15. This can be attributed to the change in leadership within the Party. The next elections were due in June of 2006. In the 2003 V.P Congress, there were manipulations among the delegates to favor Natapei’s faction and ensure it’s continued leadership and these manipulations were such that defied Party policies. Attempts were made at court to settle this improper election of the Party executive and as yet there has been no proper conclusion, with a court date still set for February this year, to review the situation.

In the meantime, the Natapei faction of VP claimed rightful and legitimate election and did not want to listen to other views regarding the welfare and future of the Party. The other faction of the Party held an extra ordinary congress in June 2004, called and requested by VP subcommittees; 96 out of 120. A new executive was elected contrary to what happened at 2003 congress.

Natapei moved to sack his senior VP ministers from his cabinet, dissolved parliament and called for General elections on July 6th. He refused to get the Party to field candidates together and thereby forced the two factions to field separate candidates. The result was disastrous. The Vanua’aku Party did not increase its number from 15 upwards, but instead lost 5 seats ending up with only 10 seats. The Vohor government was formed thereafter with a coalition of 6 Parties. At this point, I would like to mention that since the VP split in 1991, the constant coalition governments that have been formed since the 91 elections have revealed that governments were formed to foster interests of the individual parties they represent as well as personal interests, by practicing factitious administrations that are no where near democratic transparency and good governance that are necessary for the well being of the people and nation as a whole. The recent Vohor
government was a classic example of this. He was there to foster his own personal interest; to find as much money as possible for himself and his party, thereby attempting to establish phony diplomatic relations with Taiwan. This caused the end of his administration when members of his party and the rest of the members of his coalition refused to support him as a leader, consequently ousting him from Prime Minister-ship.

The present coalition government is made up of 5 parties. I would like to think that this government should be given a chance to prove itself worthy to govern the country democratically. Unfortunately, personal interest has never moved far away from politics in Vanuatu. This has become more evident recently, when members of the NUP party that is currently in leadership of government is attempting to help Vohor's UMP to pressurize this Lini government to make a reshuffle in order to remove VP and bring in Vohor's UMP. This has come about after the deputy leader of NUP was excluded from the present cabinet and is unhappy about it, making him rally support from his former party UMP, to make this change. Despite the shaky ground, Prime Minister Lini has stood firm so far and displayed courage in the face of possible defection of senior party members and loss of power.

At this point, I would like to shed some more light on what lurks under the surface, especially in regards to the public sector which the government ultimately oversees. Vanuatu lacks mature democratic administrators to run the administrations. Consequently, this has meant that since 1991, recent Ni-Vanuatu university graduates face a hard time in finding employment in the government sector, because jobs that they are trained and qualified for, which are funded by overseas aid such as AusAid, are taken up by politically appointed or politically manipulated appointees of the public sector, who lack the education, skills and training, and only hold these positions due to their political affiliation to whatever party currently holds power. With Public servants who have been selected this way, this means that they hold these positions without proper knowledge and remain there, even after their party is no longer in power. Meanwhile, the qualified, young human resources are forced to seek employment in areas they are over qualified for or have nothing to do with their qualification, and in some instances, even causes migration of local human resources overseas. This problem, which coincides with
the lack of accountability and transparency that currently plagues the governments, accumulates to further enhance the instabilities that rock the Vanuatu governments.

So this is a basic summary of where Vanuatu stands in terms of its political climate at the moment. In the meantime, people in Vanuatu are wondering whether PM Lini will make this reshuffle once more or face a motion of no confidence. Given a chance that this situation goes on for long enough so that the life of this parliament runs for at least 12 months, the possibility of a dissolution to this parliament and fresh elections may be expected in 4 – 6 months.

Until successive governments have learned from their mistakes and take steps to rectify these shortcomings, these problems will continue to affect the nation’s politics. Meanwhile, interest groups posing as political parties, who buy votes in both local and national elections, dominate the politics in Vanuatu.

Before I end, I would like to once more thank you for this honor that you have given me to stand before you today and the opportunity to share with you an inside view, or at least, one version of an inside view, into the political situation in Vanuatu. Thank you all for your attention.