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Marianas

## **Editorial**

# **Rooting For Rota.....**

The mini-hassle in near-by Rota over their political future only points up the difficulties of a status change anywhere, but more particularly on a tiny island, semi-isolated, 40 or 50 miles away from its nearest neighbor.

Our nation was built on contiguous areas, at least until Hawaii and Alaska came along. We're not used to the idea of a series of isolated islands, each with its own needs, its own culture, each with a varying degree of sophistication, and self-sufficiency. What we're saying is there is a definite paucity of understanding and information on all three sides—that is the Rotanese, the rest of the Marianas, and the United States.

Last July the Congress of Micronesia's Joint Committee on Future Status held hearings in Rota, and recently issued a report which seemed to suggest that the people of Rota are not necessarily happy with the present course of the Marianas in pursuing separate negotiations with the United States. As many as 50 percent of the people of Rota felt this way, the report indicated. The report seemed to feel that Rota would choose to remain a part of Micronesia if Micronesia opts for a close relationship with the United States which would assure "their economic development goals." The group recommended that Rota be treated separately from the Marianas when the Micronesian constitutional referendum and national plebiscites are held, and that the Congress consider making Rota permanently a separate administrative district.

While we don't pretend to know the minds of the people of Rota, who will make the final decision, we do see this as a ploy by the Congress of Micronesia's Joint Committee to throw a bombshell into the Marianas talks with the United States. They seem to be thinking that if they can get one of the Marianas islands to distain the talks, perhaps all the negotiations will fall flat on their face—a situation they obviously would welcome. Even suggesting that the Congress considers making Rota permanently a separate administrative district is little more than offering some attractive bait to the people of Rota, in exchange for wrecking the Marianas talks.

After all, the Congress hasn't considered making Kusaie a separate district, and yet it is considerably larger, and considerably more isolated than Rota is.

All this may really be a tempest-in-a-teapot. The initial hearings were held six months ago. Since that time more and more information has been made available to the people of Rota, and to the Marianas negotiators. Diane Maddex, Daily News staff writer, reports that any strong anti-Marianas leanings among Rota's people appeared to have been muted, at least publicly. She says that generally the Rotanese interviewed by her seemed beguiled at the prospect of becoming U.S. citizens or nationals, a choice they will get to vote on under the Marianas agreement, if consummated. One girl disagreed emphatically, saying: "I don't want to give up my Micronesian citizenship. I'd go to live in the Marshalls." This only goes to prove what a bug-a-boo nationalism can be. A few years ago

There wasn't any Micronesia, except for some lines drawn on a map by a scientist. But now, nine years after the first Congress of Micronesia, some of the younger people feel like Micronesians, instead of Rotanese, or Saipanese, or Trukese.

The idea of Rota becoming a separate administrative district of Micronesia is completely incomprehensible to us. There would be no way that the U.S. Congress would ever allow three separate governments, Guam, Rota, and the Northern Marianas, to operate in the same tiny island chain. There would be no way that Rota, cut off from the rest of Micronesia by many hundreds of miles could ever survive as a separate district. The seat of government in future Micronesia would be Ponape. Such island gerry-mandering just wouldn't make any sense to any thinking person. We find even the suggestion of a separate district for Rota, with its limited population, and resources meaningless, because we don't see how it could happen, or how it could function.

This is not to say that each island, including Rota, shouldn't have as much local autonomy as possible to contrive under any new government. Each island should elect its own leaders, plan its own economic growth, restrict buildings, even levy its own taxes if possible. We are definitely for local government for Rota, Tinian, and every other island, but we also feel that they have to fit into a larger picture from the standpoint of citizenship, air rights, foreign trade and negotiations, even defense.

One of the problems in charting any course for the future will be the decision on how the eventual voting will go. Will the votes of all of the people of the Marianas be counted in a plebiscite as a single vote, or will each island decide for themselves? This critical question hasn't been resolved yet, at least to our knowledge. If the vote is for all of the Northern Marianas collectively, it would seem that Saipan, with its 12,000 people, would be in a real position to decide the future of the rest of the islands.

As usual the problem with Rota seems to be one largely of communication, and education. One man, Rudy Calvo, said: "I hesitate to say what I want because I don't have the details. Our lessons so far have been very limited, not the type we can understand. We don't want hearsay or things that are too complicated. But the majority here don't understand what's going on."

Certainly the people of Rota, or in any of the other islands are going to have to go through a period of learning, of studying, and soul searching. Right now this might be difficult because not all the facts of their political future are available, because the negotiations are still going on. They can't make information available yet because all the facts and ramifications of the negotiations aren't yet known.

As a start in getting facts to the people of Rota, the Marianas Status Commission announced last week that its full membership will begin a district-wide set of public meetings in Rota on Jan. 19. We don't suggest that the Commission "sell" their program to the people of Rota, but it is pretty obvious that Rota has been treated as a sort of step-child thus far.

We're all looking for a solution that is in the best interest of the people of Rota, and the people of all the Marianas—both North and South, if such a split does exist. There are problems ahead, and it is obvious that no solution is going to please everyone, or be agreed upon unanimously. We still think it is an exciting time for the people of the islands, to have the opportunity to make such decisions, decisions that were always made for them before. JCM.