

Micronesia's road to self-government

By Erwin D. and Patience M. Canham

Under the obligation to the United Nations by which the United States holds the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, it is committed to prepare the islanders for self-government.

The task has to be completed.

Remarkable progress has been made toward fulfillment of the obligation, despite a slow start, serious handicaps, and a continuing and classic conflict between ancient indigenous institutions and American concepts of self-government. On the local level much of Micronesia has had self-government from time immemorial. Clans, extended families, castes, hereditary chiefs, and councils of elders today have significant influence and control in many parts of the trust territory.

Already one important district, the Northern Marianas, has negotiated a Covenant for Commonwealth by which it would become an integral part of the United States. Last June 17, 78.8 percent of the eligible voters in the Northern Marianas cast their ballots in support of commonwealth status.

This desire for separation from the rest of Micronesia met with considerable criticism from some representatives of the other districts, from some Americans who support the concept of a united Micronesia, and from the UN Trusteeship Council, where any division of a trust territory is deplored in principle.

Nevertheless, the ardent desire of the people themselves is an important democratic force, and in the case of the Marianas it is loud and clear. Two-and-a-half months' close observation showed us that above all they do not want to be lumped with the rest of Micronesia. They want separate status. Even those who voted against the Covenant for Commonwealth campaigned under the name: "Friends of a Better Commonwealth."

Convention meeting

The task of working out the status of the other five districts now faces their peoples and the United States. A Constitutional Convention has been meeting at the Micronesian capital, Saipan, off and on during the summer and fall of 1975. It seeks against serious difficulties to develop a frame of government in which the five districts could grow into a self-governing unity.

And, presumably after the U.S. Senate acts on the Commonwealth Covenant for the Marianas, the American Government will resume negotiations with the other five districts, first as a totality but perhaps on separate bases if this is demanded by the districts involved.

After we had finished the task of administering the plebiscite in the Northern Marianas, we journeyed through the other five districts, stopping off a few days in each, talking wherever possible with district leaders, and absorbing something of the district's beauty and individual character.

Under the imperial rules of Spain, Germany, and Japan, the peoples of Micronesia were held in rigorous colonial control. Though their own ancestral institutions of local government continued, there was no extension into the forms of government which the United States, and some at least of the United Nations, would regard as democratic self-government.

But beginning in the 1950s, under U.S. trusteeship, municipal councils were set up, district legislatures followed, and ultimately the Congress of Micronesia came into being.

Under the control of a U.S.-appointed High Commissioner, district administrators were set up.

Micronesians are steadily replacing mainland Americans (expatriates) at all levels of government. The top executive job in each of the six districts — that of district administrator — now is held by Micronesians in all cases.

College grads return

More and more Micronesians are graduating from the universities in Guam, Hawaii, and on the mainland, and returning to their native islands to take part in the emancipating and developing process.

At the same time, their ancient institutions are not being extirpated. The role of hereditary chiefs remains strong. Rigid lines and ancient taboos are respected, despite the pressures of modern life.

Most Micronesian society is traced by descent through the female line; primary land rights and clan membership are transmitted by a mother to her children. In many districts, everyone inherits land-use rights, and everyone is dependent on it. The system provides protection and security for its members, where family ties are strong.

Chiefs are always men

But the matrilineal society is not matriarchal. The chiefs are always men. The meet in the men's houses, and ill-betide the woman who ventures to invade them. Once in a while an American woman can be permitted to enter the men's house, but not a Micronesian.

In the districts other than Yap, the traditional influences may be somewhat less overt but they remain quite strong.

Another long-established institution and stabilizing force is relevant: Christianity. The Spaniards' main mission in the 16th century was to convert, and they established Roman Catholicism firmly in the Marianas and most of the Carolines, although there are significant Protestant minorities nowadays in these archipelagoes.

In the Marshalls, Protestant missionaries from Boston did the converting in the early 19th century, and their influence remains strong.

Observers agree that Christianity is a profound influence throughout the islands, easily replacing prior primitive rites. (In Saipan, the people celebrated the outcome of the plebiscite with a religious service on the following Sunday.)

As the islands in their particular ways take advantage of programs which the United States could help provide, there could be many kinds of development: farming the sea is especially attractive. Also, land use could be greatly improved. The position of the islands, athwart important sea routes to and from North America and between the Indian Ocean and Japan or the East Asian mainland, may be of great significance in the future. They are crucially placed in the mid and west Pacific, points in a vast stretch of vital ocean.

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