

VANUATU

Vemerans

Activity: 1980-2005

General notes

- Vemerans are part of Vanuatu's larger Melanesian population (Minahan, 2002; West, 2009). Vemerans are largely from the islands of Santo and Malekula (Roth, 2015: 390).

Movement start and end dates

- The term "Vemerans" refers to Melanesians located in the northern islands of Vanuatu (Minahan 2002: 1981). Already before Vanuatu's independence in 1980, Na-Griamel was formed by Jimmy (Moli) Stevens, a party advocating autonomy for Vanuatu's north and land rights. The exact date of formation is not known. The earliest evidence of existence is in 1965 when the movement was officialized (Tabani 2008: 336). Thus 1965 is coded as start date. December 27, 1975, Vemeran separatists declared the independence of the Na-Griamel Federation (Minahan 2002: 1984; Hewitt & Cheetham 2000: 313). According to Minahan (2002: 1984), "[t]he breakaway state was ended by colonial troops, and the region was reintegrated into the New Hebrides in 1977." The 1979 constitution recognized French language rights (many Vemerans speak French as their secondary language). In November 1979, Na-Griamel lost its majority in the Espiritu Santo Regional Assembly, which led to riots (Minahan 2002: 1984). Na-Griamel supporters attacked government offices and took the British district commissioner hostage. Vanuatu attained independence in late June 1980, thus we code the movement from 1980. We found no casualty estimates for the 1975-1977 and 1979 incidents. It appears unlikely that the death toll exceeded 25, however (see Tabani 2008: 344). Thus we note prior non-violent activity.
- Shortly before independence, in early 1980, Vemeran leaders again declared independence (Minahan 2002: 1984 dates the declaration to May 25, while Tabani 2008: 342 dates it to January). Both Minahan and Tabani indicate that the revolt was financed by a U.S.-based company (Phoenix Corporation) that aimed to set up a tax-free haven. The secessionist challenge was met with brute force. According to Minahan (2002: 1984), "[t]he new prime minister appealed to the United Nations for help in maintaining Vanuatu's territorial integrity. Other Pacific states, fearing secessionist groups in their own countries, sent troops to aid the new Vanuatu government. Nearby Papua-New Guinea sent 150 troops, the British sent Royal Marines, and the French provided a contingent of police. In July 1980 the British and French forces were withdrawn amid increasing violence and several clashes with the Vemeran rebels [...] Jimmy Stevens and other Vemerans were captured by Papuan troops in late July 1980, and the rebellion was effectively ended. Over 700 rebels fled to French New Caledonia, and some 1,000 people were eventually arrested. Stevens was tried and sentenced to 14 years in prison. Other Vemeran leaders were imprisoned and deported."
- Subsequently Na-Griamel was turned into a regional political party which represented the interests of the francophone northern islands. According to Minahan (2002: 1985), Na-Griamel "fielded candidates in regional and national elections from 1983, winning considerable support with demands for regional autonomy and greater control of cultural and economic aspects." In the 1980s and the 1990s, Na-Griamel also "continued to represent the Vemeran secessionist sentiment against the increasingly left-leaning government of Vanuatu [...] the Vemeranan demands for greater autonomy were repeated in the mid-1990s" (Minahan 2002: 1985). Tabani (2008) confirms that Na-Griamel remained active as a political party but adds that the party had very little success.
- We could not find further evidence of separatist mobilization. According to Garae (2014), Na-Griamel became dormant, but was revived in 2005 after Na-Griamel had normalized relations

with the state. At this point, Na-Griamel became a mainstream party calling for the defence of national sovereignty and indigenous values, with no calls for autonomy or independence (PIPP, 2008: Online). In keeping with the ten-year rule, we code the end of the movement in 2005, ten years after the last clear evidence of separatist mobilization. [start date: 1965; end date: 2005]

Dominant claim

- Na-Griamel was formed by Jimmy (Moli) Stevens already before Vanuatu's independence to advocate for autonomy for Vanuatu's north and land rights (Minahan 2002: 1981ff; Tabani 2008). Na-Griamel also made claims for independence, which were especially vehement in the early 1980s when Vemeran leaders also declared independence (Minahan 2002: 1984 dates the declaration to May 25, while Tabani 2008: 342 dates it to January). This led to violent clashes and the imprisonment of the movement's leader, Jimmy Stevens.
- Following the failed move for independence, Na-Griamel was turned into a regional political party which represented the interests of the francophone northern islands. The last claim for autonomy appears to be around 1995, as "Vemeranan demands for greater autonomy were repeated in the mid-1990s" (Minahan 2002: 1985). Based on this account, we code an independence claim in 1980 and an autonomy claim thereafter. [1980: independence claim; 1981-2005: autonomy claim]

Independence claims

- Na-Griamel declared the independence of the Na-Griamel Federation in December 1975 prior to Vanuatu's independence and again in 1980 (Minahan 2002: 1984; Hewitt & Cheetham 2000: 313). After that, the claim shifted to autonomy (see above). [start date: 1975; end date: 1980]

Irredentist claims

NA

Claimed territory

- The territory claimed by Na-Griamel varies over time. In 1975, the movement proclaimed the Na-Griamel Federation, which ceased to exist by 1977. Then, shortly before Vanuatu's independence, the organization proclaimed the Republic of Vemerana in 1980, which is composed of the Santo and Malakula islands as well as some nearby islands (Roth 2015: 399). We code the Republic of Vemerana as the movement's territorial claim based on the map in Roth (2015: 390).

Sovereignty declarations

- Na-Griamel declared the independence of the Na-Griamel Federation in December 1975 prior to Vanuatu's independence and again in 1980 (Minahan 2002: 1984; Hewitt & Cheetham 2000: 313). The 1980 declaration was issued on May 25, 1980, just a short while before Vanuatu's official date of independence (July 30, 1980). At the time, it was clear that Vanuatu would soon gain independence, so we code the declaration even though strictly speaking it was issued prior to Vanuatu's independence. [1980: independence declaration]

Separatist armed conflict

- We could not find evidence on casualty numbers for the 1980 episode, but it appears unlikely that the 25 deaths threshold was met (Tabani 2008: 342-344). We found no other evidence for separatist violence above the threshold. Therefore, the entire movement is coded as NVIOLSD. [NVIOLSD]

Historical context

- The islands of Vanuatu were settled by a combination of Australian Aborigines and Polynesians, establishing a Melanesian population as early as 1000BC. These islands saw little external contact until after first contact with Portuguese explorers in 1606, and more substantially the French (1786) and the British (1774), the latter naming the islands the New Hebrides (Minahan, 2002: 1982; West, 2009: 600).
- The Vanuatu islands were claimed by both the UK and France, leading to both powers exerting influence on the island under shared rulership. Rulership was shared on an ad hoc basis, with different communities and islands often choosing to be influenced by the French if their adversaries were influenced by the British, and vice-versa. Vanuatu existed with two sets of colonial administrations, laws, and ruling languages, but the Northern Islands were largely influenced by French culture, with islands such as Espiritu Santo being home to groups later calling themselves Vemmerans. However, the islands were not formally annexed until 1906 (Minahan, 2002: 1983; West, 2009: 600-1; Roth, 2015: 396).
- The northern islands were largely loyal to the French colonial authorities, even during WWII. During the war the US military established multiple bases on the islands, which brought about the existence of 'Cargo Cults', forms of proto Melanesian nationalism (Tabani, 2009: 332; West, 2009: 601; Minahan, 2002: 1983). Processes of decolonization were largely accepted among the islands, however in the north, there was concern that the new government would be Anglophone and discriminate against Francophone populations. In 1965, the group Na-Griamel was established by Jimmy (Moli) Stevens, to agitate against land pressure from French farmers on Santo (Tabani, 2009: 336), but this movement morphed to demand autonomy under French rule, rather than inclusion in a fully independent Vanuatu (Minahan, 2002: 1984).
- Na-Griamel and Stevens were supported by a company in the US, the Phoenix Foundation, who hoped independent islands in the Pacific could be used to establish a libertarian tax haven. This led to Na-Griamel unilaterally declaring independence on 27th December 1975 for a "Federation of Self-governing Settlements of Nagriamel" that included "Santo and the surrounding islets, but not the urban centre of Luganville; all the neighbouring islands, Aoré, Malo, Aoba and Maewo; all the islands belonging to the Banks and Torres group; and all the other groups in the New Hebrides wishing to join the federation as a free and independent people" (Tabani, 2009: 340; also Roth, 2015: 396). This independence was ended by colonial troops and the islands were reintegrated in 1977 despite the French administration seriously considering the possibility of semi-independent islands under their tutelage (The French were backing both horses, a future Vanuatu and future Nagriamel Federation) (Minahan, 2002: 1984).
- In September 1979, a new constitution was drafted, guaranteeing French language rights, a Council of Chiefs, and regional assemblies on the islands to safeguard the territorial integrity of a future independent Vanuatu. We code a cultural rights concession but no autonomy concession because the regional government was limited to local/administrative affairs. Specifically, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF, 2018: Online) notes that "Local government is responsible for preschool and primary education, primary healthcare, regional planning, roads, waste collection and disposal, cemeteries and crematoria, parks and open spaces and the promotion of tourism". [1979: cultural rights concession]
- Na-Griamel lost their majority in the Santo regional assembly in November 1979. Stevens cited voter fraud for this loss, and began planning for a new attempt to secede (Minahan, 2002: 1984; Roth, 2015: 399; Tabani, 2009: 340). Two months before Vanuatu was due to become independent, Vemmeran rebels seized British administration buildings, took the British district commissioner hostage, and declared an independent Republic of Vemmerana on 25th May 1980.

This was accompanied by smaller revolts by the Tanno to the south who were loosely allied with Na-Griamel (Minahan, 2002: 1984). Vanuatu gained its independence on 28th July 1980 with an active secession attempt underway.

Concessions and restrictions

- The PM of a newly independent Vanuatu, Walter Lini, called for support from neighbouring island states to help restore the territorial integrity of Vanuatu. A multinational force of British, French, and prominently Papuan troops landed on the island of Santo in late July, captured Stevens by late August, and cracked down on sabotage and secessionist activity between September and November. The arrest of Stevens and exile of thousands of his supporters put an end to Na-Griamel's attempt to establish an independent state in northern Vanuatu (Minahan, 2002: 1984; Tabani, 2009: 343; Hewitt and Cheetham, 2000: 313; Roth, 2015: 399). Military interventions are not coded as restrictions.
- Minahan references a period of renewed rift between Anglophone and Francophone Vanuatuans in 1988, and in response "in the late 1980's, to preempt renewed support for separatism in the northern islands, the Vanuatu authorities created a federal system of government, creating regional assemblies and local administrations" (2002: 1985). However, such a system was already foreseen in the 1979 constitution (see above). The only other details on an amendment in 1988 is the Municipal Act 1988 (CLGF, 2018: Online), which allowed local government to take loans but with restrictions. As this is a minor change to the provision of local government, no concession is coded.

Regional autonomy

- Regional assemblies were established on the islands before independence (Minahan, 2002: 1984). The constitution of Vanuatu gives the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs the right to recommendations on matters relating to culture, language, and land customs to the parliament. Provincial Government Regions are locally administered, with this principle applied equally across Vanuatu (Republic of Vanuatu, 2020: Online). However, "Local government is responsible for preschool and primary education, primary healthcare, regional planning, roads, waste collection and disposal, cemeteries and crematoria, parks and open spaces and the promotion of tourism" (CLGF, 2018: Online). The level of responsibility does not meet the threshold of meaningful regional autonomy.
- We do, however, code regional autonomy in 1980 due to de facto independence (see below). [1980: regional autonomy]

De facto independence

- Vemeran forces declared independence unilaterally just before Vanuatu's independence. We code de facto independence in 1980. Minahan (2002) mentions that British and French forces were withdrawn from the island in July "amid increasing violence and several clashes with the Vemeran rebels". Tabani (2008: 342) states the new government of Vanuatu "imposed a total blockade on Santo" following independence of Vanuatu, suggesting that the central government had little control over Vemerana. Tabani (2008: 343) states that "Vemarana had in fact experienced two months of effective independence". An international force arrested Jimmy Stevens, head of the Na-Griamel movement on the 31st August 1980. Operations to suppress the movement were largely completed by November. Therefore, independence is coded for 1980 only as control of the island was returned to Vanuatu before January 1st 1981 (Tabani, 2009: 343). [1980: de facto independence]

Major territorial changes

- The Republic of Vemerana was ended with the arrest of Jimmy Stevens on 31st August 1980. Operations to suppress the movement were largely completed by November. This is a revocation of de facto independence that was completed by the end of 1980. [1980: host change (new), revocation of de facto independence]

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Vemerans
<i>Scenario</i>	No match
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	-
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	-

Power access

- Vanuatu is not coded by EPR due to its small size.
- In 1980 we code the movement with “powerless” due to de facto independence.
- Looking at Vemeran representation after 1980, most notably there were two Vemeran prime ministers: (1) Serge Vohor, from Santo, was in office from 1995-1998, 2004, 2009, and 2011; and (2) Sata Kilman, from Malakula, was in office several times between 2010 and 2016. Furthermore, for the period since 2002, the Vanuatu parliament website (Parliament of Vanuatu, NDb: Online) lists several other cabinet members from the islands of Santo and Malekula, which are defined as Vemeran by Roth (2015: 390). Unfortunately, the parliament website does not list member constituencies before 2002.
- However by cross checking the lists of cabinet members from the parliament website with a sample of parliament meeting minutes, which list member represented constituencies (Parliament of Vanuatu, 1982: Online), cabinet members from before 2002 can be connected to regions of Vanuatu. From this, a sample of junior ministers who represent the constituency of Malo, Aore, and Santo Rural or Melekula (part of Vemeran claims) can be identified. From 1980-1983, two ministers, Thomas Reuben Seru (Minister for Primary Industries) and Kalpokor Kalsakau (Minister of Finance) represented the Malo, Aorem and Santo Rural constituency. From 1983-1987, Sela Molisa, MP representing the same constituency, was the Foreign Minister, and from 1987-1991, the Finance Minister. From 1991-1993, Serge Vohor, the future prime minister, held the position of foreign minister. For 1994, the Minister for Lands was B.P. Telukluk, MP for Melekula (Parliament of Vanuatu, 1994: Online). Nagriamel MP’s continue to be invited into cabinet positions (Nexis, 2015: Online).
- On this basis, we code the Vemerans as powerless in 1980 (due to de facto independence), junior partner in 1981-1995 (because the Vemerans held several cabinet positions but never the position of PM), and as senior partner thereafter because the Vemerans repeatedly held the PM position and senior ministerial posts. [1980: powerless] [1981-1995: junior partner] [1996-2005: senior partner]

Group size

- According to Minahan (2002: 1981), there were approx. 65,000 Vemerans in Vanuatu in 2002. This compares to a country population of approx. 194,000 in 2002 according to the World Bank. [0.3351]

Regional concentration

- According to Minahan (2002: 1981), the Vemerans made up 89% of the population of their homeland, the three northern districts of Vanuatu – Sanma, Penema, and Torba. Minahan also suggests that >98% of all Vemerans lived in their homeland in 2002. [regional concentration]

Kin

- We found no evidence for transborder ethnic kin >100,000. [no kin]

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