

# Measuring Freedom in the Pacific

The World Freedom 2017 Report paints a mostly rosy picture of freedom in the Pacific. Is it too rosy?

By Dan McGarry

On the face of it, the news is good. Freedom House released its latest freedom index ratings, and according to their numbers, Vanuatu has held steady in a world that seems to be slouching away from democracy.

With an aggregate score of 80 out of 100 and only one point away from optimal in terms of political rights and civil liberties, we seem to be doing extremely well. But as every computer programmer will tell you, your outputs are only as good as your inputs.

Vanuatu's status has remained more or less the same since 2000, but the country has endured a number of assaults on its democratic institutions in that period. Marc Neil-Jones' brief deportation for reporting on Barak Sope's illegal activities started the new millennium off with a bang. But that was just the tip of the iceberg

The list of assaults on our democratic included here is woefully incomplete. The Ombudsman, for reasons unknown, stopped sharing reports with PacLII in 2012. The Daily Post continues to receive reports, but only in printed format. There is no obudsman's website.

Transparency Vanuatu continues to issue reports and operate as best it can, but it has been suspended from the Transparency International.

The University of the South Pacific is home to the invaluable Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, or PacLII, but historical research and political analysis is thin indeed. It's easier to find meaningful research at the School of State, Society & Governance in Melanesia at ANU than it is to find it in our own backyard.

Some of the Freedom House measurements are downright head-scratching. How Fiji

managed to maintain its Partially Free designation in the wake of the 2006 Bainimarama coup and subsequent dictatorship is worth a closer look. Likewise, the significant and continuing erosion of governance, law enforcement and judicial independence in Papua New Guinea doesn't seem to be reflected in the ratings.

A clue may be found in the writings of researcher Michael Morgan. In his assessment of the 2002 standoff between Police and VMF—which itself resulted from political rivalries between UMP and VP, among others—Morgan observes that a little restraint can go a long way.

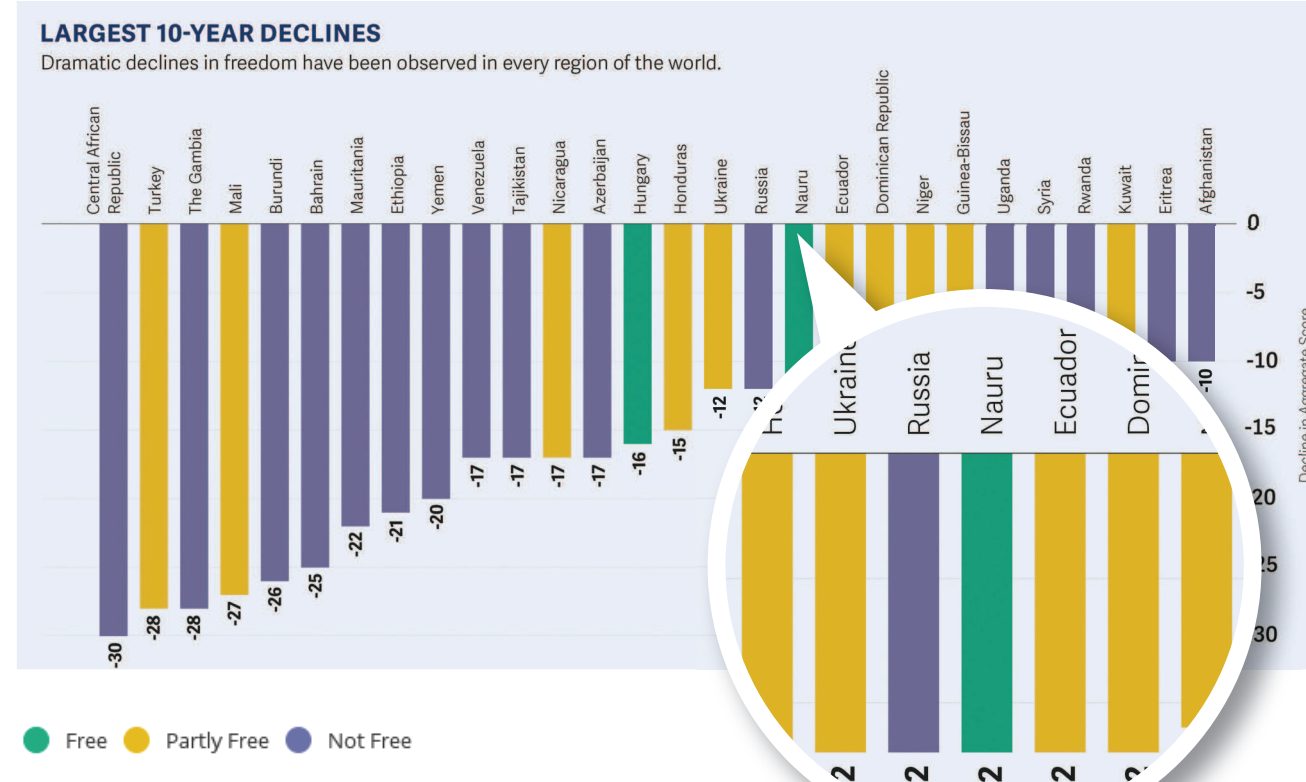
The ability of Vanuatu's leaders to pull things back from the brink proves "that political will—as much as the underlying triggers of and catalysts to instability—is a significant determinant to the maintenance of peace."

Wiser words have rarely been spoken.

One of the reasons our prospects for civil liberties and political freedom are so rosy is simply because our society is still possessed of a collective sense of decorum, if not decency. It was most recently embodied in the person of President Baldwin Lonsdale, whose public apology for the shameful conduct of Marcellino Pipite and others struck a popular chord that resonates to this day.

Such intangibles are a dangerous foundation for faith, though. They are not impermeable to erosion. And small things can weigh heavily on social mores. Vanuatu's voters tolerated remarkable amounts of corruption over the years, but when the Vanuatu National Provident Fund was targeted for misappropriation, things boiled over in an instant.

Likewise, tolerance for



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bullying tactics and victimisation of the marginalised is reducing noticeably year on year. Attitudes toward social justice, much more acquiescent in the past, are hardening. This is, overall, a good thing, but the short-term result might actually be disruptive.

As this is being written, there are several issues involving public trust that could cause significant social discord—and even small-scale insurrection—if trends aren't reversed. It's still safe to rely by and large on our ability to avoid the worst excesses, but again, this peace is a fragile one if we don't buttress our collective sense of decency with stronger institutions.

It's past time to reinvest in our judiciary, which has proved an impregnable bulwark so far. It's been working for far too long with far too little in the way of resources. Likewise, the Ombudsman's office needs more cash, more

technological know-how, and more power to initiate prosecutions and disciplinary processes.

The plain fact is that the world is headed away from democracy, and our traditional allies in protecting civil liberties and political freedom appear to be a great deal more transactional in their approach to governance than they were in the past.

The most glaring example of this can be found in Nauru, which is among worst in the world in terms of its rate of democratic devolution. This slide down the slippery slope toward autocracy could be slowed if Australia were willing to engage more closely, but the island's agreement to host a refugee detention centre seems to have blinded

DFAT to the country's many slights against good governance.

If Vanuatu is going to protect its integrity and decency in the face of an increasingly uncaring world, it's going to have to ensure that donors and development partners understand that whether they think so or not, we consider freedom to be worth investing in.

## Vanuatu Profile

**FREEDOM STATUS:** FREE

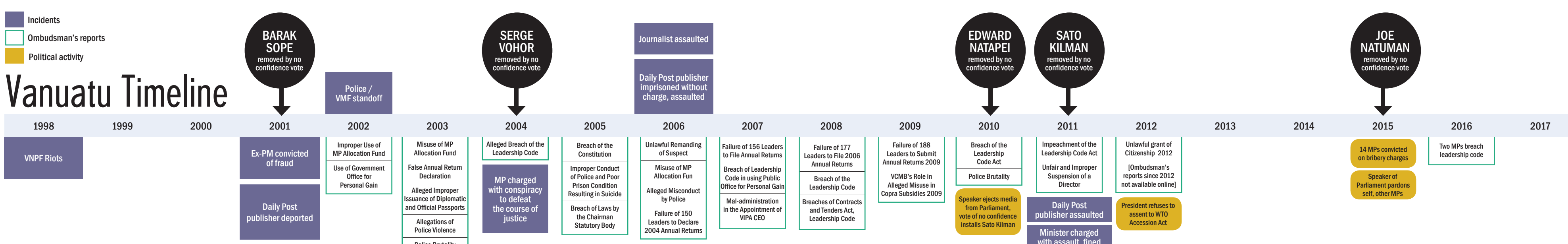
### Freedom in the World Scores

**Aggregate Score**  
 **80/100**  
(0=Least Free, 100=Most Free)

**Freedom Rating: 2/7**

**Political Rights**  
 **2/7**

**Civil Liberties**  
 **2/7**  
(1=Most Free, 7=Least Free)



	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
	PR	CL	FS	PR	CL	FS	PR	CL	FS	PR
<b>Fiji</b>	6	4	PF	6	4	PF	6	4	PF	6
<b>Kiribati</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Marshall Islands</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Micronesia</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Nauru</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Palau</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	3	3	PF	4	3	PF	4	3	PF	4
<b>Samoa</b>	2	2	F	2	2	F	2	2	F	2
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	4	3	PF	4	3	PF	4	3	PF	3
<b>Tonga</b>	5	3	PF	5	3	PF	3	3	PF	3
<b>Tuvalu</b>	1	1	F	1	1	F	1	1	F	1
<b>Vanuatu</b>	2	2	F	2	2	F	2	2	F	2

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<b>Vanuatu</b>	2	2	F	2	2	F	2	2	F	2

PR = Political Rights CL = Civil Liberties CL, PR, Freedom Rating Explanation: 1 = most free and 7 = least free Aggregate Score Explanation: 0 = least free, 100 = most free