

Free Speech More Important than Free Trade: Vanuatu Government must respect rights of ni-Vanuatu

In the lead up to International Human Rights Day on December 10th 2011, we the undersigned Vanuatu, Pacific and international organisations express our deep solidarity and support for the ongoing struggles of local communities, NGOs, Churches, Chiefs and business individuals in Vanuatu calling for urgent and meaningful dialogue with their government on the recent decision of Vanuatu accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Accession to the WTO will commit Vanuatu to a set of rigid and enforceable trade rules that are extremely hard to change or withdraw if they do not meet sustainable developmental promises, nor if they result in violations to the human rights of ni-Vanuatu. In this complex global situation of interlinked crises of food, fuel, finance and climate change, it is more important than ever to ensure that trade negotiations are conducted with full and open access to citizens of information, dialogue and decision-making.

Article 22 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights affirms that everyone, as a member of society, has *“the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.”*¹

Therefore, such binding and wide-reaching decisions as WTO accession must only be made in an environment of free, informed, and meaningful discussion with the people of Vanuatu. The members of the ‘Say No to WTO campaign’ and various Vanuatu civil society leaders have made it clear that they are still extremely uncomfortable with the possible ramifications of WTO membership, and that wider rural and urban communities do not feel adequately consulted on such a vital issue.

Therefore we call on the Minister of Internal Affairs, Hon. George Wells to permit public demonstrations and meetings to enable community voice and more than this, to willingly enter these spaces to engage with the community stakeholders. Such public voice will not lead to instability of government, as has been asserted. Rather, it will have the opposite effect as the will of the people is affirmed.

Similarly, the statement by the Hon. Minister Wells that public demonstration against a democratically elected government is unacceptable, fails to recognise that this is in fact the bedrock of democracy that is not merely comprised of a single vote at the ballot box. Civil society retains the right to influence the decisions of governments in the entire periods between elections. It is a core principle of democracy and human rights, being the rights to freely express opinions, civilly organise and the right to take part in the ongoing government of their country, directly and through freely chosen representatives.²

There are further serious threats to democracy and human rights in the recent statements and actions of Vanuatu politicians, including the suggested review of the Civil Society Organisations Act. We are also disturbed to hear of the recent Prime Ministerial directive to have a UN mission cease its work to assess the human rights impact of WTO accession, when they had prior shown support for such important work. This further

¹ UDHR: Article 22. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

² UDHR: Articles 18-22. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

impacts the ability of all ni-Vanuatu to be better informed about what WTO membership will mean for their lives. We strongly urge the Government to reconsider this position.

The Vanuatu Government can apply for an extension to ensure adequate consultation takes place before a decision on accession is made.

We the undersigned stand in solidarity and support of all ni-Vanuatu expressing their rights to be a part of the decisions that will greatly affect their lives in multiple ways and we call urgently on the Vanuatu government to do the following:

- ⤴ Immediately postpone any decision regarding WTO accession until there has been public, full and meaningful consultation with the people of Vanuatu,
- ⤴ Respect the legitimate rights of public organising of the Vanuatu people;
- ⤴ Immediately withdraw threats to review the actions of NGOs and government funded bodies that have been involved in any WTO campaigning;
- ⤴ Apply for an extension for ratification to allow more time for public input into the decision;
- ⤴ Work with all stakeholders toward alternative locally-informed, human rights compatible and sustainable development, trade and finance policies.

Signed:

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