

The Popular Democratic Party A Trailblazing Political Organization

In the early days of post-war Northern Marianas, the Popular Party was famously known in the local vernacular as the “pattidan I mamoble yan man ordinario na taotao”: the “party of the poor and common people.

The Party's motivation was to seek ways to provide for better economic, social, educational and cultural opportunities for our people, through a political system that not only allowed for a closer association with the United States, but established greater political sovereignty and self-government for the people of the Northern Marianas, as citizens of the United States.

The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands

Prior to World War II, the islands of Micronesia -- the Marianas, the Carolines (Palau, Yap, Truk, and Ponape, and the Marshalls -- were ruled by Japan under a mandate from the League of Nations. The United States seized the islands from Japan during the war, and afterward, agreed to place the islands under a trusteeship in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

On April 2, 1947, the United Nations Security Council approved the Trusteeship Agreement for the Former Japanese Mandated Islands. The Agreement was later ratified by the United States through the Congressional Joint Resolution 13, passed by both houses of the United States Congress and approved by President Truman on July 18, 1947. Because of the strategic location of the Micronesian islands, coupled with the need to preserve peace and security, these islands, pursuant to Article 76 of the Charter of the United Nations, were recognized as a “strategic trust”.

The United States initially administered the islands through the military. Later, the United States established the Trust Territory Government to

carry out its administration. The islands of the Marianas -- excluding Guam, which had been a U.S. possession since 1989 -- were classified as the Marianas District.

The Quest for Marianas Reunification

The years after the end of World War II in 1945 were a tremendous challenge for the people of the Marianas District. Life was hard, and escalation of civil unrest was becoming a frequent occurrence due in part to the forced association with the other islands of Micronesia. The economy was non-existent and stagnant, and there was little opportunity for upward mobility in education. Citizens' desire for a better life was building up, but economic and political options were uncertain. There was not much opportunity for employment in the private sector. Government leadership from the Trust Territory administration was lacking; the TT Government was unresponsive and failed to encourage or motivate citizens.

The turning point came in the early 1950's. Two major historical events gave rise to a political movement in the Marianas District. The first was the signing of the Guam Organic Act by President Truman on August 1, 1950. The second was the rejection of an Organic Act for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands by the United Nations visiting team on March 11, 1953. The rejection was based on the notion that the rest of Micronesia was not ready yet to make a decision regarding their future political status.

As a result of the Organic Act, the Chamorros in Guam were granted US citizenship. Guam was allowed to keep federal taxes for Government of Guam operations. And Chamorros were allowed to travel freely to the U.S. for employment and education advancement. Significant increases in military activities on Guam provided major inducements for the development of the economy of the island. Besides Government of Guam employment, the military, through its Ship Repair Facility (SRF) also offered a source for local employment opportunities for residents.

The military and the local government, together with various applicable federal programs, provided the Territory of Guam with a solid foundation for its prospering economy.

Meanwhile, the economy of the Marianas District was depressed, and the standard of living for the Marianas District residents was difficult. Many people viewed the reason for this as the United States' decision to lump the Micronesian islands together under the Trust Territory administration. Envious of what was happening on their southern island neighbor, motivated by their desire to seek better economic and educational advancement for the people of the Marianas, and closely aware of the political advancement on Guam where the Popular Party was exercising dominant control of the Guam Congress, a number of Chamorros on Saipan established a replica of the Popular Party. The new political organization was officially incorporated in 1958.

While interest in pursuing the formation of a political organization on Saipan was picking up steam among a small number of Saipan residents, many of whom were members of the Saipan House of Commissioners. The motivation was the improvement of the economy and the pursuit of a better political option that would allow for a closer relationship with the U.S. and US citizenship for the people.

The new Popular Party, realizing that perhaps reunification with Guam offered the best option to invigorate the Marianas economy and the quickest way to achieve U.S. citizenship, led the movement for reunification of the Mariana Islands. The Territorial Party, on the other hand, took an adversarial role on the matter, favoring a continuation of the political status quo and eventual independence for a unified Micronesia.

The first political test on Saipan was for the election of the Mayor of Saipan. The race was between Ignacio V. Benavente, Popular Party candidate, and Elias P. Sablan, Territorial Party candidate. Ignacio V. Benavente won by a landslide. In the aftermath of the Popular Party

victory in 1957, both in Guam and the Marianas District, an unofficial poll on reunification was conducted. The people of the Marianas District voted 63.8 percent in favor of reunification with Guam. The Guam Congress then adopted Resolution No. 367, requesting the U.S. Congress to incorporate the Marianas District within the governmental framework of the Territory of Guam.

Using its limited resources, and focusing its concentration on the reunification effort, the Popular Party-dominated Saipan Municipal Congress invited the members of the Guam Congress to Saipan for a meeting on reunification. Speaker Olympio T. Borja of the Saipan Municipal Congress, and Guam Congress Chairman of the select committee on the Saipan Mission Senator James T. Sablan, conducted the meeting.

By the latter part of 1964, the name of the Guam Congress was changed to Guam Legislature, and Guam's Popular Party became the Democratic Party of Guam. Similar transformations occurred in the Marianas District; the Saipan Municipal Congress became the Saipan Municipal Council, and the Marianas District Legislature was established shortly thereafter. The Popular Party of Saipan came to be known as the Democratic Party of the Mariana Islands.

So, in August 1969, an organization called Leaders of Guam and Marianas Reintegration held a conference on Saipan. A committee of eight members from each island was selected by their respective Democratic Party leadership to work together to conduct public hearings throughout the villages, with the intention that a plebiscite would follow thereafter.

The United Nations Visiting Mission was expected to arrive in the latter part of the year, so the two organizations decided to conduct a joint referendum on reintegration in September, just barely a month away. The strategy of the committee was to present the outcome of the

referendum to the Visiting Mission, together with a petition for reunification of the Northern Marianas and Guam.

The reunification attempts consumed the efforts of the Democratic Party for almost a decade, Though the voter turnout wasn't what was expected by the Party, the expressed will of the majority of the people of the Northern Marianas in favor of reunification was gratifying nevertheless. However, the result of the referendum on Guam in November 1969 was a devastating blow for the people of the Marianas District, and in particular for the Democratic Party. The people of Guam voted against reunification and not only did they reject it, they did so by a substantial margin.

Adding to the disappointment of the Marianas District Democratic Party on the outcome of the Guam vote, the Northern Marianas Carolinians, predominantly Republican Party members, through the strong lobbying of their Carolinian Association, voted instead to strengthen their ties with the other Carolinians of Micronesia.

While the Popular/Democratic Party was studying its political options in search of a better life for Marianas citizens, the Territorial/Republican Party was on the sideline, constrained by the separate interests of its Carolinian and business community base, which continued to favor a political status of free association or independence for a unified Micronesia.

While obviously very disappointed with the result of their efforts, the Democratic Party and the people of the Marianas had much to celebrate and be grateful for. In the effort to reunify the Marianas and Guam, various petitions were repeatedly submitted to the United Nations Visiting Mission. A petition requesting war reparation payments for damage to private property during the War was finally settled through a lump sum payment, placed in a trust by the United States, in the amount of \$10 million dollars for disbursement to all eligible applicants. This sum not only provided badly-needed economic relief for the people of

the Marianas District, it further reinforced their faith and desire to be associated with and to become a part of the United States.

Political Self-determination

After the defeat of the reunification question by voters in Guam, the spirit and effort of the Marianas District Democratic Party, shifted to a different approach to political strategy. Democratic Party leadership redoubled their efforts, and focused their attention on the Congress of Micronesia, a legislative body created in 1965, where political discussions regarding Micronesia's political future were taking shape among the delegates.

The Congress was concerned about their island nation's political future, the lack of economic progress, and disappointment regarding the Trust Territory Government's poor oversight administration of the entire region. Talks of independence among the Micronesian legislative delegates caught the attention of the Trust Territory officials, especially when the Congress of Micronesia created the Joint Commission on Future Political Status, giving it a mandate to study political status options available to the people of the Trust Territory and to make recommendations back to the Congress of Micronesia.

The Marianas District, controlled by Democratic Party members, was ably represented in both Houses of the Congress of Micronesia and in the Political Status Commission. The Commission recommended independence for the island nation. However, independence was exactly the opposite of what the Marianas District wanted. The great majority of the people of the Marianas desired a close and direct alliance with the United States, and to obtain U.S. citizenship.

Faced with a depressed economy and a dim outlook for the future, the restlessness of the Marianas District residents became a rallying

motivation for the Democratic Party leaders to consider various political options.

Advancing their case for a close and direct political relationship with the U.S., during a session of the Congress of Micronesia on Saipan in 1965, a resolution sponsored by Marianas District Democrats was introduced in the House of Delegates. The resolution calls for secession from the rest of Micronesia so that the Marianas District could exercise its inalienable right of political self-determination as guaranteed under the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement.

Talk of independence among the majority of the Micronesian leaders alarmed the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, which sent an advisory notice to the Secretary of Defense in October 1968. The Joint Chiefs suggested that the strategic value of the Central Pacific Ocean to the United States had not changed, especially in light of the Vietnam War. The Congress of Micronesia Future Political Status Commission met again in July of 1969 and “flatly rejected” unincorporated territorial status offered by the U.S., and instead adopted a position in favor of free association, which the Commission officially submitted to the Congress of Micronesia.

During the heightened, and at times contentious, discussions on the political future of Micronesia, the Marianas District Democratic Party delegates crafted an assertive but persuasive argument urging the other district delegates to support the Marianas District's right to seek a different political path, in accordance with the wishes of their people. The position of the Marianas delegates was successfully incorporated in the report submitted by the Future Political Status Commission to the Congress of Micronesia. This singular successful effort of the Marianas District Democratic Party delegates precipitated the ensuing events.

In 1971, the Mariana Islands District Legislature, controlled by Democrats, and the Congress of Micronesia, held concurrent sessions on Saipan. The Marianas District Legislature adopted a resolution announcing the intent of the people of the Marianas District to secede

from the United Nations Trusteeship Agreement to pursue a different political status with the United States. On February 1, Vicente N. Santos, President of the body, delivered a speech urging that Japanese investors be allowed to begin joint venture projects in the Marianas. Francisco C. Ada, District Administrator at the time, reaffirmed that “a substantial majority of our people are in favor of a close association with the United States of America.” These speeches were timed to coincide with the opening session of the Congress of Micronesia.

By March 13 of the same year, President Nixon appointed Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams as his Personal Representative to the Micronesian political status negotiations. The much-anticipated meetings were held in Hana, Maui, starting on October 13, 1971, and lasting almost 10 days. It was during this meeting that the Department of Defense revealed its interest in and requirements for land and use rights in Guam, Palau, the Marshalls, and the Marianas.

Aware of the cultural significance of land to the people of Micronesia, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird advised Ambassador Williams that the strategic interests of the US were to implement “defense-in-depth” in the western Pacific; to carry out treaty commitments; to defend lines of communication through the central Pacific, and to maintain “a credible nuclear and conventional deterrent to armed aggression” against the U.S., its allies, and countries considered vital to its security.

It was at this meeting that Edward Dlg. Pangelinan and Herman Q. Guerrero, the Democratic Party delegates to the Congress of Micronesia and members of the Congress of Micronesia Political Status Commission, officially submitted to Ambassador Williams a petition stating the desire of the people of the Marianas District to negotiate directly with the United States for a different political option.

It was a day of great exuberance and an historic victory for the Democratic Party members and for the people of the Marianas when, on April 12, 1972, Ambassador Williams formally announced that the

United States was willing to enter into separate negotiations with the Marianas District. This decision was made possible with the express consent by the Joint Committee on Political Status of the Congress of Micronesia, which recognized the inevitable reality that the people of the Marianas District had the inalienable right to seek and obtain political self-determination of their own choice.

Seizing on this historic opportunity, in May of 1972, the members of the Democratic- controlled Marianas District Legislature created the Northern Marianas Political Status Commission. The enabling legislation was drafted by Edward Dlg. Pangelinan, Vicente N. Santos, Herman Q. Guerrero, and Daniel T. Muna. The law authorized the Commission to negotiate with the U.S., perform public education, hire consultants, study alternative forms of democratic internal government, and make periodic reports to the Legislature.

The Final Milestone – an Historical Political Accomplishment

Finally, on December 13, 1972, on Saipan, in the presence of all 13 Commissioners, the majority of whom were Democrats, the first plenary session of the Marianas political status negotiations opened. On February 1, 1975, after more than three years of intensive negotiations, a proposed Covenant between the Marianas and the United States was agreed to. On February 15, this historic Covenant document was signed by Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams, on behalf of President Ford, and by the Marianas Political Status Commission, on behalf of the people of the Marianas District. Five days later, the Democrat-controlled Marianas District Legislature, led by President Vicente N. Santos, unanimously approved the Covenant.

After extensive public education through the villages under the leadership of Chairman Edward Dlg. Pangelinan, Pete A. Tenorio and the rest of the Status Commission conducted the popular plebiscite on June 17, 1975. With the active advocacy of the Democratic Party Ladies

Association in support of the Covenant, 95% of registered voters cast ballots, and the Covenant was approved by 78.8 % of the people voting.

On March 24, 1976, President Gerald Ford signed the Covenant to Establish the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands into U.S. law as Public Law 94-241, 90 Stat. 263. Thus, the birth of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands came into being.

First Elected Constitutional Governor and Lt. Governor

Pursuant to the Covenant, for the first time in its history, the people of the Northern Marianas were able to exercise their right of self-government. In 1986, Democratic Party Governor Carlos S. Camacho and Lt. Governor Francisco C. Ada were elected as the first chief executives of the Commonwealth of the Northern Marina Islands. Having no real model to follow, they effectively implemented the installation of our governmental structures. To this very day, the pillars of our democratic institutions of government have stood the test of time.

The Territorial/Republican Party

The role which the Territorial/Republican Party played throughout this time period is best described as both inconsequential and consequential. The Party was inconsequential because, during the pre-Covenant period, the Republicans were merely passive participants, asserting only their preferred political choices of status quo, free association, or independence, contrary to the wishes of the majority. However, the Republican Party and its post-Covenant leadership was at the same very much consequential. For the past 30 years, while the party has had political control of the Commonwealth, its leaders have inflicted unprecedented collateral harm to the constitutional reputation of the Government, and caused needless but irreparable harm to our representative democracy.

Because of their mismanagement of local immigration and labor, the United States Congress exercised its plenary powers over immigration and took away our authority to control our own borders. We lost our control of immigration mainly from the Republican Party's gross failure to take corrective actions regarding labor abuses, immigration policies human trafficking, inconsistent enforcement of policies, reported bribery scams of public officials, and pure complacency. All of these infractions caused the United States Congress to enact Public Law 110-229, the Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008. During the Republican Party's watch, we also saw the loss of our seven-year funding guaranteed by the Covenant, and the reduction of our allocations for capital improvement projects.

At the same time, the Republican party was rocked by one scandal after another. A disgraced Washington lobbyist hired by the Administration was criminally convicted. A Governor was impeached, and resigned to avoid conviction in the Senate. A Lieutenant Governor went to jail for misfeasance.

Now, what actually was the significant political contribution of the Territorial/Republican Party to the general well-being of the people of the Marianas? The Party was an adversarial opponent of the wishes of the majority on the question of our political status, and while it did provide a different perspective on issues, its recorded role was mostly negative and damaging. Sadly, but factually, the Republican Party legacy can simply be described in three words: corruption, contempt and deceit.

The Republican Party started off on the wrong side of history. Since the First Marianas Legislature, they worked for the passage of a very contentious and controversial legislation allowing casino gambling in the Commonwealth. Legislation enacted by the Republican-controlled Second Legislature opened the floodgates for the proliferation of the garment industry on Saipan and the influx of tens of thousands of foreign workers.

The Republican-controlled Legislature passed legislation very favorable to the garment industry. The Republican Governor's inability or unwillingness to fairly enforce the Non-Resident Workers Act and abide by the Federal Fair Labor Standard Act was very telling about whose side the Republicans were protecting. This colossal failure cost the CNMI dearly, because it prompted the U.S. Department of Justice to conduct extensive investigations that led to the indictment and prosecution of individuals involved in human trafficking, bribery, labor and wage abuses, and fraud in the scandal-ridden garment industry's business operations.

These investigations discovered a wide web of bribery scandals involving Jack Abramoff, a Washington lobbyist hired by the Republican administration. Abramoff was also implicated in his representation of the Indian casino fiasco, which almost destroyed the political career of Congressman Don Young of Alaska, though his Chief of Staff Frasier Verusio and Lloyd Jones served prison time for their illicit roles. The investigation also implicated our former Secretary of Labor and Immigration, Mark Zachares.

As a result of these investigations by the Justice Department, very prominent members of U.S. Congress were prosecuted and sent to prison for their roles on behalf of the garment industry on Saipan. The third most powerful member of Congress, Republican House Majority Leader Tom Delay of Texas, and Congressman Robert William Ney of Ohio, were casualties of the garment industry scandals. The investigation also caused the indictments of a number federal officials in the Department of the Interior.

The cumulative effects of these investigations by the U.S. Justice Department caused the decline of our often very contentious, relationship with the federal government. For years, our Republican Government bitterly fought against the application of the federal minimum wage to the CNMI. The findings of the Justice Department's

investigation also provided documented evidence for Congressman George Miller of California, Chairman of the Education and Labor Committee, to champion the argument for applying the federal minimum wage to the CNMI.

Reading the dreadful history of the garment industry in the CNMI and of its starring character, disgraced former Republican Governor Benigno R. Fitial, inevitably and chillingly calls to mind what is happening at present behind the scenes in the CNMI's very corrupt casino industry.

The casino fiasco drama, written by corrupted authors in the Republican party, is haunting Gov. Ralph Torres. It appears as if we are watching a refund of the horror movie that was the garment industry. The name of the game seems to be get rich first, and never mind who gets hurt along the way.

What does the future hold for us? More of the same failed Republican leadership like the past 30 years? We, the people of the Northern Mariana Islands, deserve something better.

Acknowledgement: This compilation of the Democratic Party history was put together from my readings of archived printed materials, conversations with people like former President of the Marianas District Legislature and Vice Chair of the Marianas Political Status Commission Vicente N. Santos, Former House Speaker Pedro R. Guerrero, and my personal involvement and recollections of the events.

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