XII. Political Organization

A principal concern of post-war Trust Territory administration has been the extension of local self-government among the various island communities in Micronesia. During the war, as major sections of this island area came under American military control, military government authorities utilized existing local political organizations, usually following patterns already established by the Japanese administration. After the close of hostilities with Japan, greater effort was made to formalize the machinery of local self-government. In 1947, while the ex-mandate was still under military government, Commander Marianas, then charged with the administration of the entire area, directed the various military government units to establish local municipal governments and to set up local taxation measures to support these municipal governments (United States Navy Department, Commander Marianas, 1947). This directive was of particular importance in the Marianas, for prior to that time, although there were a number of Chamorro officials, there was little formal organization.

Under the provisions of the 1947 directive, the administration in the Northern Marianas district was called upon to establish separate municipal governments on each island. The intent was to avoid imposing a single form of local government everywhere, and the directive provided that the local political organization might be organized in quite different ways in different areas—some with hereditary chiefs exercising most of the authority, others on more democratic lines. The directive states:

These municipal governments need not be uniform in type and organization and they shall be adapted to the accustomed usages and desires of the residents of each community.... It is desired that in so far as practicable these municipalities be molded out of existing native government organization.

Other provisions of the directive relate to the levying and collecting of taxes to support the local municipal governments, formulation and enactment of local rules by such governments, and the means
by which the supervisory functions of the administration with regard to police, sanitation, and education are to be made effective.

On the islands in the Marianas district, apart from Saipan, the communities are small and the procedures of the local government informal. Adequate communication among the elected council and mayor, the people, and the representative of the American administration can be carried on by word of mouth. Legislative and executive functions often overlap, without disrupting the limited municipal operations. The small size of the communities is conducive to informal procedures and to word-of-mouth communication, consonant with the fact that relationships within the community are personal and face-to-face rather than impersonal and indirect. Each municipality is theoretically a tax-collecting and disbursing body, but budgets are very small, although the municipality pays the salary of one or more elementary school teachers, and additional financial support for education is provided by the Trust Territory administration.

The larger population and more elaborate municipal services on Saipan present a more complex picture. The organization of executive functions is more complex, a sizable budget is normally involved, and formal procedures for collecting taxes, making disbursements, and keeping financial records are necessary for the effective operation of the local government.

**Organization of the Municipal Government**

The formal organization of the municipality of Saipan is primarily a cultural borrowing from Western sources, partly through the medium of the administration and partly in an indirect manner from the Chamorros of Guam.

*Executive Branch.*—The executive branch is headed by a paid, full-time mayor elected by popular vote for a four-year period. He is responsible for overseeing the work of the several executive departments which comprise the executive branch: the treasury, economics, public works, education, public health, and public safety. Each department has either a full- or part-time head. The heads of the last three departments are, respectively, the school principal, the medical aide, and the sergeant-major of the constabulary. They are actually appointed, paid, and supervised by the civil administration authorities, but their inclusion in the municipal organization has been a distinct advantage in co-ordinating the activities of the municipality and in facilitating communication between the adminis-
tration and the municipality. The other department heads are appointed by the mayor. The function of the treasury department is to collect fees and taxes, to keep records of collections, and to make disbursements. The public works department is supposed to maintain the electricity, water, and road systems within the village areas, as well as the telephone system for the entire island. The economies department keeps vital statistics—usually at considerable variance with the records of the administration—and has a number of other highly nebulous functions. The duties of the education, public health, and public safety departments have been briefly described in the section dealing with the relations of the administration to the Saipan community. The administration, rather than the mayor, is actually responsible for the effective functioning of these latter departments.

The mayor prepares an annual budget for the municipality, recommends legislation to the legislative branch, and is the principal point of contact with the administrative authorities. The last is one of his most important functions.

Legislative Branch.—The legislative branch consists of fourteen commissioners and eleven councilmen, who together form the Congress of Saipan. Originally there was only one group—the commissioners—but later the councilmen were added. The commissioners are the representatives of the various districts, each commissioner being elected for a one-year term by the voters of his district. The councilmen are elected at large, without respect to district, for a one-year term. At first these two groups met separately, but in order to simplify procedures and achieve a more workable organization they decided to meet together, which they do about once a month.

The commissioners and council pass municipal ordinances and other local legislation, particularly pertaining to taxes and fees, and theoretically must approve the annual budget for the municipality. Minutes of their meetings are kept in written Chamorro, and legislation is promulgated in written form.

Judicial Branch. As mentioned previously, the mayor is also the judge of the municipal court, in turn the lowest tribunal in the court system, which as a whole is under the immediate supervision of the administration. This supervision is at a minimum, however, at the municipal court level, where proceedings are conducted in Chamorro, usually with no American personnel present except as spectators.
Elections. Elections are held every year. Eligible voters consist of men and women over the age of eighteen years. Election polls are set up in each district and are under the supervision of officials appointed by the legislative body. Written ballots are used.

The above outline indicates the principal characteristics of the municipality organization. A more important question is the manner and effectiveness of its functioning. The post-war period is the first time in their history that the Saipan Chamorros and Carolinians have been equipped with the organizational trappings of a representative form of government, in the Western sense. It is not surprising, considering the present disturbed local scene, that numerous difficulties have plagued the municipality.

The Functioning of the Municipality

Since its inception, the municipality has not functioned smoothly, partly for the perfectly understandable reason that it is a new organization and cannot be expected to work without difficulty. It is worth-while, however, to provide an example of its difficulties and to indicate some of the underlying factors involved.

The municipality operates on a sizable budget. Supposedly, the mayor draws up the budget for the following year, and it is thereafter examined, altered if necessary, and approved by the legislative branch, after which it receives final inspection and approval by the administrative authorities. At the close of the fiscal year 1949–50, the mayor presented a budget of $65,000 to the legislative branch, covering expenditures for the following year. In the budget, expenditures exceeded the most generous expectations of revenue by over $7,000. The commissioners and councilmen cut the budget by several thousand dollars and passed it on to the administration, which pointed out that even with the proposed cuts there was little hope in the present precarious state of the island economy that revenues would be adequate for the proposed expenditures. Thereafter, the matter was dropped and nothing was done, except that the mayor did not accept the cuts recommended by the legislative branch. He further authorized the purchase of a new second-hand jeep for the municipality, much to the disgust of some citizens. In October, 1950, more than three months after the commencement of the new fiscal year, nothing had been done about final approval of the budget, although disbursements were being made.

Budget difficulties are by no means confined to Saipan these days, but the example is one of many that are indicative of uncertainty on the part of the Saipan leaders as to how to handle efficiently the municipal finances and other problems confronting their municipal organization. Numerous factors underlie these difficulties:
Unclear Delineation of Functions within the Organization.—The municipal organizations of Saipan and the other islands north of Guam were set up in a relatively informal manner. A tentative municipal charter was drawn up by the mayor and a representative of the administration but it was conveniently forgotten. Saipan, however, is a much larger community than that on either Tinian or Rota and it is difficult to make a poorly delineated political organization work. The deliberations of the legislative body on Saipan have been marked by endless discussion and bickering and general ineffectiveness, largely because the members had no clear idea as to what they were supposed to do, for the functions and extent of authority of the legislative group, particularly in relation to that of the executive branch, have never been clearly defined. Both Chamorros and Carolinians are much in favor of the idea of representative government but they are unfamiliar with its mechanics. Most of the discussion in council meetings that I attended revolved around procedural and jurisdictional matters rather than around specific action to be taken within a commonly accepted framework of legislative functions. Another factor is the keen sense of status that all Chamorros have and that affects the relations between commissioners and council, the latter feeling that it is a somewhat superior body. In addition, as the legislative responsibilities were never defined vis-à-vis the executive branch, a small-sized power vacuum was created, which was quickly filled by the mayor, whose dominating personality, backed by the implied authority conferred by his closeness to the administration, helped put the councilmen and commissioners into a state of uncertainty and relative impotence.

In order to correct this defect of unclear delineation of functions, a charter outlining specifically the functions of the various branches of the municipal government was drawn up in Chamorro in 1950. The step was logical in that the Chamorro leaders are a literate group, but whether the existence of the charter will have a permanent clarifying effect remains to be seen.

Lack of Background in Political Affairs.—An important fact is that neither the Chamorros nor the Carolinian minority on Saipan had an indigenous functioning political organization of their own at the outbreak of World War II. Under the Germans and Japanese, there were appointed, and in the latter part of the Japanese period, elected, representatives of the Chamorro and Carolinian population, but these representatives were for the most only convenient channels through which the administration funneled rules, regulations, and
miscellaneous information. Thus, despite their Westernization, the Chamorros have no political organization and no real political experience on which they can rely. Representative government is highly approved in principle, but its mechanics are not understood, nor is there a traditional form of political organization that can be drawn on for support. At the same time, the Saipan community is just large enough so that the informal personal, face-to-face type of relationship operative in the affairs of the single villages on Tinian and Rota is not completely adequate for effective political operations. A formal machinery of government is necessary.

Lack of Clear Delegation of Authority.—The Saipan municipality is in no sense a sovereign unit and such political authority as it possesses is derived from the administration. A fundamental point in Trust Territory policy has been the extension of local self-government, and the administration on Saipan has been careful to avoid interference that might be construed as being unduly paternalistic, but there has been no delegation of political authority in terms clearly understood by the local people. If local self-government is to expand, delegation of authority will naturally increase and will be a changing rather than a fixed entity, but its limits must be clearly formulated at a given time. The fact that these limits have not been set is a contributing cause of the ineffectiveness of the legislative group in the municipal organization.

Lack of a Stable Economy.—When the Chamorros and Carolinians were concentrated in Chalan Kanoa after the invasion, the military government authorities provided the area with running water and electricity. When Saipan was developed as a base, a central generating plant was built and the local villages in 1950 were using power from this central plant and were continuing to utilize water from the navy's water system. In 1950, however, the municipality was paying a charge calculated on a cost basis for these services. Taxes and fees collected from the citizens were supposed to finance these and other municipal services, but the municipal government was facing serious problems in making its income meet its disbursements as the economic situation deteriorated with the collapse of the wage economy. Thus, the post-war attempt at local self-government—made difficult by the previously outlined problems—was operating under the additional handicap imposed by the prevailing uncertainties of the current economy.

As a result of these factors, the municipal organization was operating in a creaky fashion, was facing many unsolved problems, and was in no sense stabilized.
Political Leadership of the Electorate

Saipan's political leaders in 1950 were neither the old nor the young, and in the selection of leaders there was not apparent a choice based on any single factor such as age. The criteria of selection for political leadership are varied. The following qualities seem to be the significant traits controlling the selection of leaders.

(a) Ability as a public speaker. Among themselves, the Chamorros enjoy discussion. Skill in argumentation and ability as a public speaker are important criteria of political leadership. This is an expression of the fact that the Chamorros tend to be argumentative, though a long tradition of emphasis on authority in church, family, and government has not favored the development of intellectually inquiring minds.

(b) Willingness to speak out boldly against the opposition is likewise considered a desirable quality. This is particularly important in the informal discussions with neighbors, friends, and relatives through which a leader obtains his support.

(c) Possession of formal schooling. All the political leaders are literate in Chamorro, all have a knowledge of spoken Japanese, some can speak English, and a few are linguistic virtuosos, knowing three or more languages. Knowledge of the language of the current administering power is considered particularly important, and formal schooling is felt to be desirable.

(d) Being a good Catholic. By this is meant not only observing the orthodox obligations associated with confession, communion and other rituals of the church, but possessing a strong moral sense of helpfulness and respect for others.

(e) Being well-known. All the leaders are prominent, not merely as a result of their election to office but because they have been concerned with local affairs as these have affected at least their own respective districts.

(f) Being effective in dealing with the administration. The Chamorros, through experience with administrative officials during the last decade, generally maintain an outward mien of respect and agreement in the presence of such officials. There are very few who can state diplomatically a position or opinion at variance with one previously offered by an official, and who are able to meet an administrative official on relatively equal terms. This ability is admired, and much of the present mayor's political strength derives from his capabilities in this respect.
The attributes listed above pertain primarily to facets of a leader's behavior in relations with others, rather than to intellectual attainments, and it is my impression that the Chamorros place emphasis on the former. This is not to say that knowledge and judgment do not play a part, for the Chamorros are quick to point out an ignorant though voluble man as one of little account. All the members of the council as well as the mayor were intelligent men. But the maintenance of effective personal relationships is a criterion of the Chamorro leader, as it probably is in most societies.

It should be noted that no one man possessed all the personal attributes given above, and several were conspicuously lacking in some of the more prominent leaders. Together, however, these attributes form a culturally sanctioned list of desirable qualities in the political leader.

In addition to these positive criteria there are negative ones. The most important refer to Chamorro canons of modesty. A would-be political leader does not announce his candidacy for office, and for a man to campaign in his own behalf would be unthinkable. No man would state publicly that he wished to be elected to a particular office.

One day I asked two of the more prominent young men in the village why this was so. They were slightly astonished at my asking. "It could never be otherwise among Chamorros," they replied. "What if one man openly campaigned for himself anyway? The people would say 'malago hu magas' [he wants to be a 'big shot'], and they would mistrust him immediately, suspecting him of ulterior motives for personal gain."

In addition to avoiding any statement that he is openly seeking office, the Chamorro political leader goes even further and says that he does not wish to be elected. This is particularly true of incumbents. With the approach of election time, the incumbent will state that he has served long enough, that he has many pressing matters to occupy him, that he appreciates very much the people's support, but that it is time for him to step aside, to allow other and abler men to succeed him. These expressions are generally phrased in a stereotyped form and are in accordance with the strong Chamorro feeling that a man must not push himself forward publicly by making speeches in his own behalf.

As a result, a leader who really does not wish to be elected must use very strong words indeed if he wishes anyone to believe him.

José V. did not, for reasons of indifferent health and pressing personal problems, wish to run for office to succeed himself. He is a popular man and
would probably have been elected. In order to make his position understood he asked the mayor to announce his stand over the village loud speaker system, a bit of equipment surviving from military government days. The mayor stated firmly over the system in Chamorro: "Señor V. appreciates very much the support the people have given him, but in case anyone is thinking of voting for him, Señor V. wishes me to say that it is impossible for him to be a commissioner and that such voters should vote for another man."

There is a strong, culturally phrased sanction, therefore, against a man’s openly seeking political office. The man desirous of a political career must use other and more subtle methods. In accordance with the criteria previously stated, the leader should be known for the strength and firm phrasing of his opinions in neighborhood discussion, but he must carefully avoid expressing a high opinion of himself as the one most suitable for translating such opinions into action.

It is my impression that the electorate has a keener interest in the persons to be elected than in political problems, a not uncommon feature in many communities in other parts of the world. The votes cast in the 1950 election amounted to slightly under 900, which was probably a bare majority of eligible voters. However, this is not a matter of indifference, for by Chamorro custom a family sends one or two representatives to social functions, and if the parents have voted, or even one member has, a family may feel that its responsibility has been fulfilled.

There are no organized political parties on Saipan, and no groups among the electorate are organized to attain a specific political objective. There is a division of opinion in the community favoring one or the other of the two most prominent leaders, both of whom hold political office, but this division is not crystallized into political parties. There are no "platforms" on which these two leaders base their public utterances. There are no clearly defined "sides" on political problems, which in themselves have not been clarified. In voting, the electorate expresses preferences for leaders rather than for tentative solutions to political issues.

There are also no nominations. One year, at the suggestion of the administration, nominations were held, but a number of Chamorros expressed a dislike of the custom, probably because it carries a connotation of campaigning for office.

No women are elected to political office, for politics is considered primarily a man’s sphere of activity. However, there is a small group of women who maintain an active interest in community
Cultural and Political Unity Among the Chamorros in the Marianas

All the Chamorros of the Marianas realize that they are bound together by a common cultural tradition. This common tradition, including the Chamorro language, is a unifying factor that has not been nullified by political separation of the northern islands from Guam after the Spanish-American War. The Chamorros recognize themselves as a single ethnic group, regardless of which of the Marianas they happen to reside upon. At the same time, this unity does not (1950) find expression in a commonly accepted desire for political union of all the islands into a single political entity. Whether this attitude will develop remains to be seen. At present, local problems engage the people's attention. The Chamorros on Guam have been vitally interested in obtaining the full rights of American citizenship. As the center of the Chamorro world, the position of Guam and the political changes on Guam tend to set the pattern of thought for the Chamorros on the northern islands. The latter feel they are in an anomalous position as residents of the Trust Territory. When they journey to Guam to visit relatives they are confronted by cumbersome immigration regulations, and the few that have travelled to Hawaii have had to face comparable problems in gaining admittance. In 1950, the Chamorros of Saipan petitioned a visiting United Nations Trusteeship Committee that they be admitted to the United States, primarily, I believe, because they wished to attain the same political status as the Chamorros on Guam and probably because they also hoped that local economic conditions might thereby be ameliorated.

The Carolinians

As a group, the Saipan Carolinians are perhaps less concerned with local political affairs affecting the entire community than are
the Chamorros. The Carolinians have a high degree of group consciousness, but their political activity is largely directed toward protecting the interests of their own group. In elections they vote solidly for Carolinians. The present mayor is in part Carolinian descent, speaks fluent Carolinian, and has an extensive knowledge of Carolinian custom. In the election that put him into office he received the entire Carolinian vote, whereas the Chamorro vote was split among several candidates, including himself. The Carolinians also have five elected representatives on the legislative body. The social solidarity of the Carolinians makes them an important political group; but the Carolinian representatives take only occasionally a part in the discussion of the legislative body.

The Carolinians clearly choose as political leaders men with the best knowledge of English and of the administration’s role in the current changing situation, in the hope that Carolinian interests will be protected thereby. There is no carry-over into modern political life of the former concept of chieftainship. There has also been a shift in representation since Japanese times in that the former principal representative, who has a knowledge of Japanese but not of English, no longer takes an active role, though he remains much respected by the Carolinians. As a group, the Carolinians have much less schooling and are much less interested in obtaining it for their children than are the Chamorros. Few of them have acquired a knowledge of English and they are consequently at a disadvantage in dealing with the administration.

Carolinian political meetings also offer points of contrast to those of the Chamorros. In January, 1950, a crisis arose in municipality finances because the utilities bill was so high that drastic economies were necessary. After a meeting of the council, district meetings were held to urge the people to cut the consumption of water and electricity, to build their own cisterns for rain catchment, and to pay their taxes.

In order to discuss this matter, the senior Carolinian member of the council met with the residents of the two Carolinian districts in the Carolinian meeting hall. The meeting started late in the evening and to encourage attendance a man went down the streets shouting, “If your family can’t send a man, send a woman!” Eventually some 75 or 100 family representatives arrived. Of these, five were women, though two left when men relatives arrived. The women entered the room in typical old-style crouching fashion to show respect and crept to places along the side. The scarcity of women and the behavior of the few present were clearly a reflection of the virtual exclusion of women from the men’s houses, where political affairs were formerly conducted.
The senior Carolinian member sat in the center of the hall, with those present crowded around the sides. There were no benches or chairs. There was no discussion, and the proceedings consisted of a lengthy speech by the presiding officer, emphasizing the steps that should be taken. The Carolinians are enthusiastic beer-drinkers, but they are not good tax-payers, and much of his speech was on the theme of beer or water. At the conclusion the audience thanked him and departed.

The same night Chamorro district meetings were held, one of them in the town hall. The audience was mixed - men and women, old and young. They sat in chairs and benches ranged around the room and there was much discussion and considerable argument, in which the women as well as the men participated.

As this example indicates, Carolinian women take little part in routine political meetings. It is characteristic of the Carolinian women, however, that in a crisis it is they, rather than the men, who take real action, with a degree of co-operation, determination, and perseverance that is most impressive.

The Carolinian group suffers, particularly at Tanapag, from a lack of communication with the administration. When it was announced that the last American naval governor was leaving Saipan, consequent upon the closing down of military facilities, the news was received at Tanapag in a garbled version that stated that the American government officials were departing and that made no mention of the continued residence of an American civil administrator. Tanapag was much disturbed, the people envisioning that the Americans were about to place the Marianas once again in the position of a football in the game of international politics and conflict. Unable to gain satisfactory information from their menfolk, the Carolinian women descended on the governor to get the matter clarified.

Summary

The political organization of Saipan represents a partially assimilated borrowing from Western sources, and its effective working is made difficult by unclear definition of functions within the framework of local government, a lack of recent experience and background in political affairs on the part of Chamorros and Carolinians, a lack of clear delegation of authority by the administration to the local unit, and the uncertainties of the economic situation. The present political organization is largely an innovation not yet established, though in time a more stable structure will probably emerge.

Although the framework of the municipality organization is an introduced element, in the selection of leaders the Chamorros utilize distinctive criteria, and the political behavior of the leader is strongly influenced by culturally patterned canons of modesty. The Caro-
linians as a minority ethnic group have a strong feeling of group consciousness that leads them to elect Carolinians and not Chamorros as their leaders and that makes their principal political preoccupation the protection of their own group interests.