Hawai‘i’s Politics: A Brief Historical Sketch

Gavan Daws and George Cooper rightly noted a historically close relation between land and power in Hawai‘i. In pre-contact Hawai‘i, a paramount chief (mo‘i) exercised dominant political power on each of the several major islands of the chain. Powerful traditions, including the duty to hanai (feed) and to ho‘omalu (protect), demanded reciprocity between unequals, the ali‘i (chiefs) and the maka‘ainana (commoners), and bound both rulers and ruled. In 1795, with the help of western firearms, Kamehameha I succeeded in uniting all the islands into a quasi-feudal kingdom. Further changes would come quickly. Five months before the missionaries appeared, and evidently in response to the loss of pono (perfect harmony in the universe), Ka‘ahumanu abandoned the ‘aikapu (literally, the sacred eating, but more widely the defining norms of Hawaiian religion). In 1840, the monarch, urged on by the new haole Kahuna (the influential spokesmen for the hundred or so haoles then in Hawai‘i) authorized creation of a constitutional monarchy on the English model. It had a hereditary House of Nobles and an elective House of Representatives. This modern Hawaiian government would legislate the Mahele, a decision which, by introducing private property, enabled the fundamental—and for the maka‘ainana, disastrous—restructuring of the Hawaiian political economy, from production for use to a profit motivated market-based plantation system. The introduction of private property undercut the traditional land system (the system of ahupua‘a) and gave the monarch and ali‘i, who now owned all but ?government? or public lands, the right to sell land (`aina). It would be purchased by enterprising foreigners who, in due course, became Hawaii’s “Big Five.” It is important to emphasize that this was a decision by ruling Hawaiians, motivated, it seems, for a number of reasons, some good and others not so good, and that it was enforced over the active protests of the common people who saw clearly what was at stake. One example, from among the hundreds of petitions which constituted “the petition movement,” prophetically made the point: “If you, the Chiefs, decide immediately to sell land to the foreigners, we shall be overcome .[W]e, to whom the land has belonged from the beginning, shall all dwindle away.”

The ruling chiefs lost control of the land before they lost control of the regime, first with the Bayonet Constitution (1887), forced on King Kalakaua by a small group of well-organized haole rifle companies, and then, of course, with the illegal overthrow of Queen Lili‘uokalani in a coup d’etat led by Lorrin Thurston, with the help of a U.S. warship in Honolulu harbor. At this time (1893), haoles held perhaps 80% of the private land even while they numbered perhaps no more than 7% of the total population and, under the prevailing Constitution, could cast but 4,015 votes. The Republic re-aligned power in Hawai‘i, not only by destroying the monarchy and the hereditary house of nobles, but by introducing a property qualification on voters which disenfranchised the common people as well. Indeed, there is some irony in the fact that with annexation in 1898, universal manhood suffrage for Hawaiians was restored.

The stage was set then for the next episode of politics in Hawai‘i, Hawai‘i as a territory (colony) of the United States. Hawaiians did not acquiesce to the new arrangements, but found themselves in a structural dilemma: While the Hawaiians and
part-Hawaiians had a clear majority of votes until 1922 and more than any other group through the 1930s, real political power was held by the Governor, appointed by the U.S. President, and by the US Congress, none of whom had interest in sustaining, still less, in promoting the interests of the Hawaiians. The Home Rule Party, led by the redoubtable Robert Wilcox, was fundamentally counter-revolutionary in that its goal was to restore the old order as it had been before--an attitude present still today in the sovereignty movement. His opposite, Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaole, believed that by joining the Republican party, he could both transform it and, subsequently, restore the sovereignty of the Hawaiian people in terms consistent with the common understanding of the “sovereign people.”

Kuhio’s strategy had definite limits, well marked by his “success” of 1920 in getting passed the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, which, he hoped, would bring Hawaiians back to their land. But to get Big Five approval, legislators not only removed cultivated sugar lands from the homestead laws, but with the amendments which came in the following years, large amounts of land originally set aside for Hawaiian homesteading were contracted to plantations for pineapple cultivation. The question of access to decent land for homesteading and other uses by Hawaiians remains, of course, part of our current legacy.

There were also some benefits for some Hawaiians from Kuhio’s strategy. The Republican Party held power until the Democratic “revolution” of 1954. As a coalition of haoles and Hawaiians, it had the power of patronage. In 1927, with less than a 15% of the population, Hawaiians had half of all the judgeships and elective offices, 46% of all appointed positions, 55% of the clerical positions, and nearly all the local police, facts not lost on the disenfranchised Japanese. Although Japanese comprised the largest plurality by far, the proportion of registered Japanese was 7.6% in 1926, and jumped to 24.9% in 1936. (They would remain the largest plurality until 1990, replaced by haoles). During this period, few among the Japanese who had franchise rights exercised them, and those who did had no opportunity to register dissent in Hawaii’s one-party system. We need to be reminded that anti-Japanese sentiment was vocally expressed by both Hawaiians and haoles who feared their potential political power, and that it had divided the Japanese community. Stanley Porteus, whose name, rightly, was recently removed from a building on the UHM campus, had argued in 1926 not only that Hawaiians were, if regrettably, low on his “racial efficiency index,” but that “aggressive and unscrupulous in pursuing an advantage,” the Japanese would, if given the chance, take over the Territory. The Filipinos, without a second generation of native born, were hardly a problem for the power-structure: In 1934, eighty-eight of the 102 registered Filipinos voted.

World War II forced a choice on the Japanese of Hawai`i. And they chose America. Led by the charismatic Jack Burns and propelled by the overcoming of ethnicity by class, the mainland-led, revitalized union movement and the nisei veterans of the 442nd, educated at McKinley High School, reconstituted the Democratic Party, the party which set Hawai`i off on its current path and which has dominated local politics since statehood. The Democrats would not be a party of the past: they would be a progressive party of “the people.” that is, “locals,” a term which became political,
especially with the influx of military (in the 1950s some one sixth of Hawaii’s population were military and their dependents) and with the infusion of huge sums of outside investment which so dramatically altered this place. Not noticed in the Democratic Revolution of 1954 was the total absence of Filipinos, and, perhaps more surprising, the marginal role of Hawaiians in the politics of Hawai‘i. Smaller in numbers than either Japanese or haoles (in 1950, perhaps 15% of the total) and indiscriminately “local” at this point in time, Hawaiians could even be entirely excluded as Trustees of the Bishop Estate. In a recent interview, Tom Gill, an important figure in the Democratic party in Hawai‘i, could discuss 30 years of Hawaiian government without mentioning a single Native Hawaiian name or concern. The “reinvention” of Hawaiians, in the Hawaiian Renaissance of 1970s, has produced a new political consciousness among Hawaiians and put sovereignty on the political agenda. Much less successful and by now nearly forgotten, the leaders of “Palaka Power,” including Hawaiian John Waihe‘e, would make the effort, at the Constitutional Convention of 1978, to reassert the interests and values of ordinary “local” people. Establishing Hawaiian as a second official language in Hawai‘i was one of its potentially critical important innovations.

It remains contestable whether all the avowed aims of the Democrats, but especially land reform and a developmental path other than tourism, were possible. There was, first, the state of the global political economy and the question of what else Hawai‘i could offer. Second, there were the interests of the constellation of groups who had power: finance and landed capital, including the Bishop Estate, the unions, and huis of locals, well-positioned in the governing but divided Democratic Party. Finally, one needs to keep in mind the nature of democratic politics in America.

On the one hand, the Democrats were divided not only ethnically, but by serious matters of policy, represented by Burns, the consummate consensus politician, and his one-time Lieutenant Governor, Tom Gill, whose principles gave him the allegiance of those haoles who weren’t Republican. Of course, land reform threatened the old oligarchy, but it also threatened those who were now in position to shape land use policies in their own interests. Moreover, reform was assumed by Hawaiians to be a threat to the Bishop Estate, and worse, it could be presented as genuinely un-American. The unions were also divided. Hawaii’s most important union, the ILWU, had deep roots in the sugar economy and at its inception in the islands, it had been vulnerable to red-baiting, a condition which lingered on long after it made any sense. Indeed, its leader, Jack Hall, had come nearly full circle so that by 1964, the ILWU, although vehemently opposed to US involvement in Vietnam, was ready to back Republican Hiram Fong for the US Senate seat, rather than Democrat Tom Gill. On the other hand, Gill had the support of Art Rutledge’s Unity House unions, which had already tied up the hotel workers of Waikiki and were in competition with the ILWU on the neighborhood islands for the predictably large increase of members in the industry which was replacing sugar. Finally, voters in Hawai‘i, like voters elsewhere, were vulnerable to expensive media blitzs. In the 1970 primary, Burns spent what seems now like a paltry sum: a little over $100,000 to Gill’s $55,000, and overall nearly one million, more than the combined total spent by Gill and the two Republicans, Hebden Porteus, son of Stanley Porteus, and part-Hawaiian Samuel King, son of a conspirator against Queen Lili‘uokalani. Scandals in the Democratic
administration on the front page of the Advertiser seemed to have made little impact in the 1970 election. Indeed, like voters everywhere, voters in Hawai`i found it easier to vote personalities and loyalties, personal and ethnic, instead of either corruption or policies.

Yet, despite the very real advances made--in abortion rights, in higher education and in health and welfare, dramatic growth benefited residents unevenly. Some people surely got rich and still others, including many AJAs became a genuine property-owning middle-class with modest houses in Manoa and elsewhere. But real wages fell dramatically, skyrocketing land values put young families in crisis, and tourism brought pitifully few good jobs. Indeed, the evidence suggests not only that many of these jobs are going to the latest great immigration to Hawai`i, from the US Mainland, but that younger locals are leaving for the Mainland in a great outmigration.

The election of 1998 bears the marks of this. In the 1970 Republican primary, Sam King’s innocent remarks about marijuana possession had given his opponent, Porteus, all the material he needed to paint King as a defender of “hippies” and of student protesters, painted as rioters. King had predicted that if he were not elected, Hawai`i would be one-party state thereafter. But in 1998, a Republican haole, malihini, female from a neighbor island, leading a party fractured by the same issues which were King’s undoing, came within 5254 votes of defeating an incumbent Democratic Filipino-American Governor from Kalihi who had been in local politics for decades.

Where indeed is power in Hawai`i today? Even though plantations are gone, land still matters in local politics. And even though decisions made in Washington and in corporate offices in Chicago and Tokyo have immense impact here, we need to remind ourselves that there remain choices for both State and City and County governments. Hawaiian sovereignty may well be the wild card in all of this.

Peter T. Manicas
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