

VISION FOR AN INDEPENDENT GUÅHAN: WE ARE STRONGER THAN WE THINK

ESSAY | DEBATE

By the Independence for Guam Task Force

Independence requires imagination and vision, and a memory of our past. It can be frightening to many, because it means breaking away from our colonial past, challenging the status quo, and learning to trust in our abilities as an island community again. But in seeking new partnerships and possibilities, we can embrace our strength and envision an independent Guåhan that truly aligns with our interests, cultural values and geographic realities.

Independence will grant the people of Guåhan autonomy to decide what laws, institutions and programs best suit our needs, and ensure the protection of our human and natural resources. Guam will negotiate agreements and treaties with other countries to help protect our island and improve our economic, social, and cultural welfare. Our community will shape the governance, economy, health care, education, public safety, and justice systems, and environmental and cultural protections necessary to create a prosperous and sustainable Guam for future generations.

Independence is not something only for Chamorros to support. But this status can best ensure that the place of the Chamorro people, their unique connection to this island, is not lost or erased. An independent Guåhan can be a hub for Micronesia, a bridge between the east and the west. It will enhance our diversity and place in the world, while protecting the rights of the Chamorro people.

When discussions on political status change and decolonization first emerged in Guam,

one constant refrain of resistance was the notion that Guam could never be self-sustaining, self-sufficient or independent in the way the United States is. But as the late Guam Senator Frank Lujan once wrote, "Those who defend Guam's colonial status argue that economic independence for Guam is impractical. We happen to agree. Guam by herself can never be economically independent. But nor can our great mother country the United States. There no longer is any such animal as an independent nation in the world today... All nations in the latter part of the 20th century are economically interdependent."

Every independent nation, the United States included, works with and depends on others. The difference between a colony and an independent country is that the latter can choose who to associate with and can negotiate the terms of the relationship. Independence will not happen overnight. Guam will work with the United States to transition out of our current political status. If Guam chooses to maintain a relationship with the U.S. for defense or other purposes, we will negotiate those terms. Unlike our territorial status, being allied with the U.S. would not preclude us from working with any other nation.

There is also no correlation between the size (in terms of land mass or population) and the prosperity of an independent country. There is no standard by which a colony has become "mature" enough to govern itself. Two countries, regularly ranked among the top ten richest in the world, are similar to Guam in size. Singapore, whose land mass is only slightly larger than Guam's (278 sq. miles) is considered the third richest country in the world. Luxembourg, which has a population of less than 500,000, is considered the fourth richest country in the world. These nations are successful because independence allows them to take advantage of and best utilize their natural and human resources, as well as their location.

We have modeled much of our social, political and economic infrastructure after perceived American ways of handling affairs. Rarely do we ask ourselves if these institutions and

ideologies serve us well. The way we handle our food security is connected to a late capitalist, globalized system of production, which relies on importing food from poorer countries. Why should an island live like this? Why should an island rely on a system whereby 90% of what everyone eats and uses comes from elsewhere? The same goes for education and so many other things. As an independent nation, we could refocus our educational system so that it is derived from life here and the world around us. What if our educational system drew its core from Chamorro culture, history and the realities of living in Micronesia on the edge of Asia, instead of just copying curriculum from the United States and adding an occasional karabao ride?

During the 12th Pacific Festival of the Arts, a number of delegations from independent Pacific nations visited Guam. In conversations with members of the island community, these delegations didn't express regret for becoming independent. Although all faced challenges, no one thought our independence as impossible. Speaking to our group, one woman from Nauru — one of the smallest nations in the world with only 10,000 people — asked, "Why would anyone regret freedom? We all deserve to be free."

We must inspire our people to believe in ourselves as our ancestors did for thousands of years. Colonization has taken so much away from our people, including feelings of self-confidence. There is a general feeling that we on Guam, Chamorros and others, cannot do anything for ourselves and could never survive without the United States.

It is here that the words *Maga'låhi Hurao*, the first Chamorro leader to organize large-scale resistance to the Spanish presence in Guam, are so important in reminding us that we can be trusted with our own destinies. In a speech attributed to him, he rallied Chamorros to rise up, saying, "Metgotña hit ki Ta Hasso" — "We are stronger than we think." It is important to remember this when considering independence. We are not too small. We are not too immature. We are not too far away. Independence is not impossible, because we are stronger than we think.

Participants at the Respect the Chamoru People Rally held at Adelup on April 7, 2017. Courtesy of Michael Lujan Bevacqua.

