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**FORTH INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR THE ERADICATION OF COLONIALISM**

**Pacific regional seminar on the implementation of the Fourth International  
Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism: advancement of the Non-Self-  
Governing Territories through the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)  
pandemic and beyond**

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**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**PRESENTATION**

**BY**

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A Growing Foundation, but still an Uncertain Future for Guam's Quest for Decolonization  
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Si Yu'os Ma'åse na makombibida yu' mągi ta'lo para bai hu saonao gi este matua na dinanña'. Gi tinestigu-hu pą'go, bai hu sangani hamyo put i halacha na hiniyong gi isla-ku yan i kinalamten-mąmi para in gi'ot i direchon-mąmi komo taotao.

Your Excellency Chairwoman Keisha McGuire, distinguished delegates, representatives and experts from fellow Non-Self-Governing Territories, I am honored to be here again speaking before you on the topic of Guam and its continuing quest for decolonization. I also want to thank the government and people of Saint Lucia for hosting us on their beautiful island.

In my statements today, I want to provide updates on important work that has been taking place in Guam in recent years to create educational resources and programs to support a robust campaign around the island's decolonization. But inconsistency and apathy from the administering power, remains a looming challenge, and I will conclude my remarks discussing this reality.

Formal efforts to study Guam's political status and to educate the island community about it date back to the early 1970s, with the establishment of the first Guam Political Status Commission. This Commission determined that a change in Guam's political status was needed, especially in light of the islands in the Trust Territory of Micronesia around Guam being able to negotiate for their political future with the US. The US Congress responded to request for greater self-government with legislation that allowed Guam, as well as the US Virgin Islands the chance to draft constitutions, while remaining in unincorporated territorial status.

This effort to pass a constitution as a territory failed when in 1979, the voters overwhelmingly rejected a draft constitution, expressing a preference for choosing a political status option or direction first, and only then drafting a constitution to match. The failure of the constitution, then led to plebiscites in which Commonwealth, a new potential status for Guam was preferred. Commonwealth status would have given Guam more autonomy, while still remaining close to the US politically. Despite more than a decade of negotiations, this effort died after a bill was introduced to the US Congress, but never left committee.

A new plebiscite was scheduled for 2000, where status options would be limited to only integration, free association and independence, in order to help restart the process. It was postponed however, and no plebiscite has been held since.

I provide this historical background, because the modern, formal movement for decolonization in Guam is currently more than a half century in age. The energy and momentum for this movement has waxed and waned over these decades, and so have efforts to educate the island community about this issue. Some Governors and their administrations have taken this issue more seriously than others. We can often gauge the

level of commitment to this cause, in terms of the programs, outreach and educational materials that have been created.

What we have seen in the past 10 years, across both Republican and Democratic administrations in Guam, is a shared commitment to supporting education on the issue of decolonization. It was under the previous governor, a Republican, Eddie Calvo, that money was provided for the first time since 2000 to task forces meant to conduct grassroots education on each of the three political status options. I have served since 2016 as the co-chair for the Independence for Guam Task Force.

The seeds planted by the previous governor have been maintained by the current Governor, a Democrat Lou Leon Guerrero and her administration, and pushed to grow even further. In 2019 for example, an international conference called "Fanhita: Our Continuing Quests for Decolonization" was held in Guam, bringing together activists, scholars and political leaders from both the Caribbean and Pacific to discuss those who have undergone a process of political status change and those for whom it continues to be a dream deferred.

At the same time, work was being done to produce a series of educational videos and social media materials, all aimed at updating the newest generation and bringing them into the decolonization conversation. I am 41 years old at present, this conversation is older than I am, and even for some who have lived it, keeping track of constitutions, commonwealths and plebiscites, can be difficult. The Commission on Decolonization (COD) has done a commendable job creating these materials. Over the past year they have released through the Guam Public Television Station two documentaries on decolonization.

The Commission has also completed, as of this month, a large-scale, in-depth self-governance study. Created primarily by scholars Dr. Carlyle Corbin from the US Virgin Islands, Dr. Ken Gofigan Kuper from the University of Guam and Joseph Bradley, the chief economist for the Bank of Guam, this massive tome provides both a detailed analysis of Guam's current political status, and the possibilities that lay ahead under each of the three primary future political status options. A social media campaign to make portions of the study more accessible and digestible to the general public is currently being prepared.

At present right now at the Guam Museum, there is an exhibit that provides more information on the topic of decolonization, titled "Fanohge CHamoru Put I Tano'-ta: Charting Our Collective Future." The exhibit chronicles movements of the past on status change, as well providing insights into possible futures.

The title of the exhibit is drawn from the national anthem that was written for the island in 1919, by Ramon Sablan, who would later go on to become the first Chamoru medical doctor. At that time, Guam was governed by the US Navy and Chamorus had no rights except that which the US Navy allowed. In 1925, when the island was visited by US Congressmen, Sablan asked them about Guam's territorial status, "'For more than a quarter of a century we have been under the American flag, but neither as citizens nor as aliens...if we are neither aliens nor citizens, what are we?'"

This question remains unanswered almost 100 years later. But what is apparent is that there is a greater desire and readiness amongst the people on Guam, in particular its indigenous Chamoru population, to pursue a change in Guam's political status.

What we have seen is that the issue is largely bipartisan, receiving support from both political parties. The current administration has been creating more and more resources to provide critical education on this topic. Surveys conducted over the past five years have consistently shown that while there is no clear consensus over which political status would be preferred, the majority of those on island, desire to leave behind Guam's territorial status and pursue something more genuinely self-governing.

What has largely been missing on this issue is consistency and engagement from the United States itself. Trying to keep track of the positions of the US in terms of the political future of its non-self-governing territories can be an impossible task. For Guam, despite being a US possession for more than 120 years, the majority of people in the United States still do not know that Guam is attached to the US politically. For those that do know, their knowledge is usually defined by US military strategic interests, as Guam has been called by US military planners "the tip of America's spear." American rhetoric on the importance of democracy, freedom and liberty across the world, rings hollow when faced with the simple reality of its non-self-governing territories.

This issue becomes even more complicated, when we consider that the US has provided funding to support political development and self-determination in Guam, which helped create much of the educational resources I previously mentioned. But at the same time, that federal government can seek to attack the very existence of Guam's indigenous people through lawsuits aimed at taking away their right to hold a plebiscite for their preferred political status. It has also taken aim at the ability for Guam to develop programs to provide land for Chamorus made landless, primarily due to the US military's post-World War II base expansion. This atmosphere of US federal interference has had a chilling effect on efforts to restart the plebiscite process.

This is unfortunate, since a plebiscite or some similar goal is much needed in order to maintain and further increase momentum in the community on this issue. Creating the afore-mentioned educational resources is important, but its full value can scarcely be realized unless it has clear goals, such as an impending vote, to help the public understand the value or stakes.

This haphazard and at times schizophrenic approach to Guam and its political status has created apprehension locally, as the federal government can scarcely be relied upon to engage directly or consistently or even at all on these issues. This lack of productive coherence is sadly nothing new. When it comes to its non-self-governing territories, the US has a tradition of insisting that the territories follow rules, it has no intention of keeping for itself.

Robert Underwood, formerly Guam's non-voting delegate to the US Congress provided an insight into this during the negotiations with the Clinton Administration for Guam to achieve Commonwealth status. He wrote in his article "The Status of Having No Status,"

When John Garamendi presented the Clinton Administration's position on Chamorro self-determination in a Congressional hearing in October 1997, I was appalled by the lack of coherence. He stated that the administration opposed ethnic qualifications for any ballot failing to accept and appreciate the ethnic dimensions of the Treaty of Paris or the Organic Act. I asked him that if we ran a political status election according to his definitions, would the federal government abide by the results. He said no and further indicated that such elections cannot be binding on the federal government. Imagine that. The federal government wanted to set the ground rules for an election in which the results didn't matter for them. It seems ridiculous to be concerned about the conduct of an election you already decided you don't need to abide by.

Despite more than a century of the United States formally possessing colonies, the biggest hurdle that we face to achieving some measure of justice through decolonization remains the fact that the US is in denial about having colonies at all.

As a means of helping to break this decolonial deadlock, I feel that a visiting mission to the island, to bring a greater attention to the issues I have mentioned today and beyond, would be helpful in fostering increased engagement with the administering power and the people of Guam.

Si Yu'os Ma'åse and thank you for hearing my testimony today.