

OUR VIEW

SELF-DETERMINATION

'Aha best hope for aspirations of Hawaiians

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Native Hawaiians have their best hope in decades to coalesce around a powerful vision for self-determination. The 'aha, or constitutional convention, that is being organized for late this year leaves it to Native Hawaiians to decide for themselves whether they want to organize an indigenous government, and if so, what form that government should take.

The democratic process will include the election of 40 Native Hawaiian delegates by Native Hawaiian voters, here and outside the state. Once elected, those delegates will spend 40 days working through many contentious issues to see if they can craft a governance model to present to Native Hawaiian voters to ratify. Eligible voters will be drawn from the Native Hawaiian roll, which relies on birth certificates and other documentation to verify ethnicity.

The beauty of all this is that Hawaiians of all political points of view will be able to weigh in. This process is not controlled by Congress or overseen by the U.S. Department of Interior.

The 'aha delegate elections may turn out to be the liveliest Hawaii has seen in many a political season, as nationalists, royalists, Akaka Bill supporters and Akaka Bill opponents all are sure to be among the field of candidates.

First in the election of delegates, then in the 'aha itself, and finally in the ratification vote — if there is one — the predominant nature of the modern Hawaiian sovereignty movement will fully emerge, gain momentum and gain influence.

We won't dare predict the outcome of the delegate elections, except to say that varying views are likely to hold sway according to electoral region.

But it seems that a new model of Hawaiian activist and leader is rising, less inclined to compromise or to be satisfied with the limited form of self-rule bestowed by U.S. federal recognition, the nation-within-a-nation status Hawaii's congressional delegation sought unsuccessfully for years via the Akaka Bill. That failed measure was supported by some Hawaiians and reviled by others.

Then the Obama administration took up the cause, and Department of Interior officials held hearings in Hawaii last summer to consider whether the DOI should establish administrative rules to facilitate a government-to-government relationship, similar to that held by many Native American tribes.

The scores of Hawaiians who turned out to viscerally oppose that effort were evidence of a sea change in the sovereignty movement, as a younger generation that has grown up speaking Hawaiian and practicing cultural traditions denied to their early forebears refused to accept anything less than the restoration of an independent Hawaii as justice for the 1893 overthrow and 1898 U.S. annexation.

That is not to say that such activists hold the majority view among Native Hawaiians committed to self-governance. Where the majority stands is one of the important things the 'aha will find out — and why it is so important for all eligible Native Hawaiians to participate, that is to say, Hawaiians 18 and older who register with the Native Hawaiian Roll Commission by mid-October.

Some activists have refused to register, because they don't want to legitimize what they consider a false authority and flawed process (the nonprofit facilitating the 'aha got its funding from the state Office of Hawaiian Affairs).

They are making a mistake, and risk missing an opportunity to influence what could be a defining moment for all of Hawaii.

Unlike past efforts, this 'aha, facilitated by the nonprofit Na'i Aupuni, has the funding and leadership to come to fruition.

As long as the group upholds full integrity, with transparent processes through all stages of the 'aha, the people of Hawaii are likely to recognize whatever emerges from the convention as the predominant view of a disparate movement.

No Hawaiian should willingly give up a seat at that table, or willingly cede that influence.