

Transcript

My name is Ben Kiluwe, and I'm the Chief Electoral Officer for the Republic of the Marshall Islands. I've been working as the CEO since 2019 up to date, and it's a very challenging work, and I appreciate all the assistance that I usually get from the government and from all election stakeholders, and I'm really grateful to be a part of this project, to tell stories of democracy in our country.

So, I will be talking about, But, how our nation became, Like, a self-governing nation, after it conducted its first referendum on its political status, and the story happened, back in...I would say back in...late 70s, 1978, if I recall correctly, that was the date of the referendum.

It was July 1978, and I was still young at the time, growing up on a remote island in the islands of Jaluit Atoll, and I was staying with my maternal grandparents. And, you know, your life growing up in the remote islands, you know, it was kind of a carefree life. Everything is simple. News from outside would come, either through the radio, or maybe somebody's visitors who arrive on the island.

My job on the day that I'm telling the story about, there was a... I remembered a man coming to our island with the news that we would be having a referendum for the people to decide whether they would remain as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under the Congress of Micronesia, which was, at the time, was the governing body of the entire Micronesian region, and it has all the states, individual states, allow Bonapay, CNMI, they were all part of this... Congress on Micronesia, including Marshall Island, and we were under the trusteeship.

We were, as a trusteeship, territory administered by the Colonizing Authority, which was the United States, and we became part of the trusteeship after the Second World War. So that's...so that was the governing body during that time. And the referendum was going to take place and see whether we should remain as part of the Trust Territory or become separate and chart our own political future.

And I remember the man who came to the island. He was one of those people from the government, they sent him over to discuss with the local community in the islands, about the referendum and the proposals, as was, that had been put up for a referendum, and I vividly remember that this topic was really very sensitive. We had people who were advocating for it, and people were, you know, against it, and I remember that when the man came and talked about the question, people were, you know, they had all different, sort of, ideas of the question that he was bringing up for discussion.

Some of the people were kind of...lingering, you know, uncertain. Some of them were, you know, kind of, they already made up their minds, but I recall it seems like the idea of remaining in the status quo of being governed under the Trust Territory, Congress of Micronesia, it was kind of...the idea was kind of supported by the people there. And part of the reason is because of, you know, we've been... Since then, I would say, since the early 19th century, we will have been

under different colonizers, colonial rules, like the Germans, and the Japanese, and later, later on after the war, and then the Americans came. So...those people were kind of supporting the idea of remaining in the Congress. They were kind of really uncertain. They, rather, were very cautious, and they wanted to deal with, you know, stability.

They said, "You know, if we become independent, then who's gonna take care of us? How are we gonna look after ourselves? That was their... that was the Cheap thinking at the time.

But for those who were advocating, they were more concerned about, you know, because...being part of the Congress, everything was being shared by the entire, and all these islands under the Congress, we have our own...they have their own culture and language, so... and also, Marshall Island at the time was also being used as a...for military purposes, and there was compensation that was being paid, so, that was kind of for those people who were supporting the idea of becoming separate, you know, they were...concerned more deeply about having our own culture, language, and, you know, we'd rather...why don't we just have it on our own and... chart our own future with what we have.

So, it was...I would...I remember that it was very...discussion about the referendum, you know, it affected a lot of people.

I could say that some families got, really, you know, they really take it on a...really personal, personal level. They wouldn't want to communicate with other family members, just because of... they are having a different opinion about the question [that] was put up for the referendum.

So, that's how the atmosphere at the time was. I could tell from within my own family that we had this kind of family thing between, because of the different opinions.

But anyway, when the voting day arrived, and the entire Marshall Island voted, the pro[-independence] party won. It was by a strong majority, to have our...to govern our own future, our own political status. So, when I look back, and kind of, reflect on the 1978 referendum, it taught me how we became to become one nation, and it was, in 1979, after the referendum, the new constitution was finally ratified into law on May 1st, 1979.

So, looking back now, I understand that it set...the historical events that took place, the creation of the Constitution, the establishment of us becoming a self-governing nation, and formation of our modern political relationship today.

Thank you.