Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement

The Hawaiian sovereignty movement is a grassroots political and cultural campaign to gain sovereignty for Hawaii. Generally, sovereignty groups focus on self-determination and self-governance, either for Hawaii as an independent nation (in many proposals, for “Hawaiian nationals” descended from subjects of the Hawaiian Kingdom or declaring themselves as such by choice), or for people of whole or part native Hawaiian ancestry in an indigenous “nation to nation” relationship akin to tribal sovereignty with US federal recognition of Native Hawaiians. Some groups also advocate some form of redress from the United States for the 1893 overthrow of Queen Liliʻuokalani, and for what is described as a prolonged military occupation beginning with the 1898 annexation. The movement generally views both the overthrow and annexation as illegal.

Sovereignty advocates have attributed problems plaguing native communities including homelessness, poverty, economic marginalization, and the erosion of native traditions to the lack of native governance and political self-determination. They have pursued their agenda through educational initiatives and legislative actions. Along with protests throughout the islands, at the capitol itself as well as the places and locations held as sacred to Hawaiian culture, sovereignty activists have challenged United States forces and law.

History

Coinciding with other 1960s and 1970s indigenous activist movements, the Hawaiian sovereignty movement was spearheaded by Native Hawaiian activist organization and individuals who were critical of issues affecting modern Hawaii including: urbanization and commercial development of the islands, corruption in the Hawaiian Homelands program, and the appropriation of native burial grounds and other sacred spaces. During the 1980s the movement gained cultural and political traction and native resistance grew in response to urbanization and native disenfranchisement. Local and federal legislation provided some protection for native communities but did little to quell expanding commercial development.

In 1993 a joint congressional resolution apologized for the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. In 2010, the Akaka Bill passed, which provided a process for US federal recognition of Native Hawaiians and gave ethnic Hawaiians some control over land and natural resource negotiations. However, the bill was opposed by sovereignty groups for provisions that legitimized illegal land transfers and was also criticized by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights for the effect it would have on non-ethnic Hawaiian populations. A 2005 Grassroot Institute poll found the majority of Hawaiian residents opposed the Akaka Bill.

Background

Main articles: “Overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, Blount Report, and Opposition to the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii.”

The ancestors of Native Hawaiians may have arrived in the Hawaiian Islands around 350 CE, from other areas of Polynesia. By the time Captain Cook arrived, Hawaii had a well-established culture with populations estimated to be between 400,000 and 900,000 people. In the first one hundred years of contact with western civilization, due to war and sickness, the Hawaiian population dropped by ninety percent, with only 53,900 people in 1876. American missionaries would arrive in 1820 and assume great power and influence. Despite formal recognition by the United States and other world powers of the Kingdom of Hawaii, American influence in Hawaii, with assistance from the US Navy, eventually took over the islands, overthrowing its Queen in the process. The Kingdom of Hawaii was overthrown beginning January 17, 1893 with a coup d'état orchestrated by, mostly, Americans within the kingdom's legislature with aid from the United States military.

The Blount Report is the popular name given to the part of the 1893 United States House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee Report regarding the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii. The report was conducted by U.S. Commissioner James H. Blount, appointed by U.S. President Grover Cleveland to investigate the events surrounding the January 1893 overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii. This report provides the first evidence that officially identifies the United States' complicity in the lawless overthrow of the lawful, peaceful government of The Sovereign Kingdom of Hawaii. Blount concluded that U.S. Minister to Hawaii John L. Stevens had, in fact, carried out unauthorized partisan activities that included the landing of U.S. Marines under a false or exaggerated pretext and to support anti-royalist conspirators; the report went on to find that these actions were instrumental to the success of the revolution and that the revolution was carried out against the wishes of a majority of the population of the Hawaiian Kingdom and/or its Royalty.

Native Hawaiians, activists and supporters commemorate January 17 annually. On December 14, 1893, Albert Willis arrived unannounced in Honolulu aboard the USRC Corwin, bringing with him an anticipation of an American invasion in order to restore the monarchy, which became known as the Black Week. Willis was the successor to James Blount as United States Minister to Hawaii. With the hysteria of a military assault, he staged a mock invasion with the USS Adams and USS Philadelphia, directing their guns toward the capital. He also ordered rear admiral John Irwin to organize a landing operation using troops on the two American ships, which were joined by the Japanese Naniwa and the British HMSChampion. On January 11, 1894, Willis revealed the invasion to be a hoax. After the arrival of the Corwin, the provisional government and citizens of Hawaii were ready to rush to arms if necessary, but it was widely believed that Willis' threat of force was a bluff.

On December 16, the British Minister to Hawaii was given permission to land marines from HMS Champion for the protection of British interests; the ship's captain predicted that the Queen and Sovereign ruler (Liliuokalani) would be restored by the U.S. military. In a November 1893 meeting with Willis, Liliuokalani indicated that she wanted the revolutionaries punished and their property confiscated, despite Willis' desire for her to grant amnesty to her enemies. In a December 19, 1893 meeting with the leaders of the provisional government, Willis presented a letter written by Liliuokalani, in which she agreed to grant amnesty to the revolutionaries if she was restored as queen. During the conference, Willis told the provisional government to surrender to Liliuokalani and allow Hawaii to return to its previous condition, but the leader of the provisional government, President Sanford Dole, refused to comply with his demands, claiming that he was not subject to the authority of the United States.

The Blount Report was followed in 1894 by the Morgan Report, which contradicted Blount's report by concluding that all participants except for Queen Liliʻuokalaniwere “not guilty”. U.S. Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham announced on January 10, 1894 that the settlement of the situation in Hawaii would be left up to Congress, following Willis' unsatisfactory progress. Cleveland said that Willis had carried out the letter of his directions, rather than their spirit. Domestic response to Willis' and Cleveland's efforts was largely negative. The independent New York Herald wrote, “If Minister Willis has not already been ordered to quit meddling in Hawaiian affairs and mind his own business, no time should be lost in giving him emphatic instructions to that effect.” The Democratic New York World wrote: “Is it not high time to stop the business of interference with the domestic affairs of foreign nations? Hawaii is 2000 miles from our nearest coast. Let it alone.” The Democratic New York Sun said: “Mr. Cleveland lacks ... the first essential qualification of a referee or arbitrator.”

The Republican New York Tribune called Willis’ trip a “forlorn and humiliating failure to carry out Mr. Cleveland's outrageous project.” The Republican New York Recorder wrote, “The idea of sending out a minister accredited to the President of a new republic, having him present his credentials to that President and address him as ‘Great and Good Friend,’ and then deliberately set to work to organize a conspiracy to overthrow his Government and re-establish the authority of the deposed Queen, is repugnant to every man who holds American honor and justice in any sort of respect.” The Democratic New York Times was one of the few New York newspapers that defended Cleveland's decisions, saying that “Mr. Willis discharged his duty as he understood it.”

While there was much opposition and many attempts to restore the kingdom, it became a territory of the US in 1898, without any input from Native Hawaiians. Hawaii became a US state on March 18, 1959 following a referendum in which at least 93% of voters approved of statehood.

The US constitution recognizes Native American tribes as domestic, dependent nations with inherent rights of self-determination through the US government as a trust responsibility, which was extended to include Eskimos, Aleuts and Native Alaskans with the passing of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Though enactment of 183 federal laws over 90 years, the US has entered into an implicit, rather than explicit trust relationship that does not give formal recognition of a sovereign people having the right of self-determination. Without an explicit law, Native Hawaiians may not be eligible for entitlements, funds and benefits afforded to other US indigenous peoples. Native Hawaiians are recognized by the US government through legislation with a unique status.

Royal Order of Kamehameha I

The Royal Order of Kamehameha I is a Knightly Order established by His Majesty, Kamehameha V in 1865, to promote and defend the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi. Established by the 1864 Constitution, the Order of Kamehameha I is the first order of its kind in Hawaii. After Lot Kapuāiwa took the throne as King Kamehameha V, he established, by special decree, the Order of Kamehameha I on April 11, 1865, named to honor his grandfather Kamehameha I, founder of the Kingdom of Hawaii and the House of Kamehameha. Its purpose is to promote and defend the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hawaii. Until the reign of Kalakaua, this would be the only Order instituted.

The Royal Order of Kamehameha I continues its work in observance and preservation of some native Hawaiian rituals and customs established by the leaders of the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi. It is often consulted by the U.S. Government, State of Hawaiʻi and the various county governments of Hawaiʻi in native Hawaiian-sensitive rites performed at state functions.