

TESTIMONY OF CONGRESSWOMAN MAZIE K. HIRONO
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
ON H.R. 2314
THE NATIVE HAWAIIAN GOVERNMENT REORGANIZATION ACT OF 2009
1324 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Hastings, and members of the Committee:
Thank you for this opportunity to testify today on H.R. 2314, the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act, which provides a measure of justice for the indigenous, native people of the Hawaiian islands.

I would like to begin by wishing all of you a happy Kamehameha Day. Today is a state holiday in Hawaii, where we celebrate King Kamehameha I, who united all of the Hawaiian islands and established the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1810. It is for his people, the Native Hawaiians, that H.R. 2314 seeks to end years of injustice and provide a path to self-determination.

The Kingdom of Hawaii was overthrown in 1893. Hawaii's last monarch, Queen Liliuokalani, was deposed by an armed group of businessmen and sugar planters, who were American by birth or heritage, with the support of U.S. troops. The Queen agreed to relinquish her throne, under protest, to avoid bloodshed. She believed the United States, with which Hawaii had diplomatic relations, would restore her to the throne. It is important to note that the sovereign nation of Hawaii had treaties with other nations, including the United States, including: Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia. As we now know, despite the objections of U.S. President Grover Cleveland, the injustice of the overthrow of an independent nation was allowed to stand, and the Republic of Hawaii was established.

In 1898, the United States annexed Hawaii. Prior to annexation, a petition drive organized by Native Hawaiians secured signatures of almost two-thirds of the Native Hawaiian population opposing annexation. The total was 29,000 signatures out of an estimated Native Hawaiian population of 40,000. These historical documents are now a part of our National Archives.

Native Hawaiian culture was under siege. The Republic of Hawaii prohibited the use of the Hawaiian language in schools. Everyday use of the Hawaiian language diminished

greatly, and it was in danger of dying out. Hula dancing, which had been suppressed by the missionaries and then restored by King Kalaukaua, who preceded Queen Liliuokalani, survived but did not flourish. Hawaiians were pressured to assimilate and much of their vibrant culture was lost.

In 1903, Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaʻole was elected to serve as Hawaii's delegate to Congress. One of his most notable achievements was the passage of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1920, which set aside some 200,000 acres of land for Native Hawaiians. The reason for the legislation was the landless status of so many Native Hawaiians, who were displaced by newcomers to the islands and became the most disadvantaged population in their native land. Congress passed the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, which is still in force, in recognition of its trust responsibility toward Native Hawaiians.

Hawaii became a state in 1959. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a Native Hawaiian cultural rediscovery began in music, hula, language, and other aspects of the culture. This cultural renaissance was inspired by hula masters or kumu hula, who helped bring back ancient and traditional hula; musicians and vocalists, who brought back traditional music and sang in the Hawaiian language; and political leaders, who sought to protect Hawaii's sacred places and natural beauty.

This flourishing of Hawaiian culture was not met with fear in Hawaii, but with joy and celebration and an increased connection with each other. People of all ethnicities in Hawaii respect and honor the Native Hawaiian culture. We are not threatened by the idea of self-determination by Native Hawaiians.

In 1978, Hawaii convened a constitutional convention that was designed, in part, to right some of the wrongs done to Native Hawaiians by proposing changes to the state constitution. The constitutional convention created the Office of Hawaiian Affairs or OHA so that Native Hawaiians would have some ability to manage their own affairs on behalf of Native Hawaiians. The people of Hawaii ratified the creation of OHA in the state constitution and voted to allow the trustees of OHA to be elected solely by Native Hawaiians.

The provision relating to the election of OHA trustees was challenged in Rice v. Cayetano all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which heard the case in 1999. I attended the hearing at the Supreme Court while I was serving as Hawaii's Lieutenant Governor. The Court ruled that the State of Hawaii could not limit the right to vote in a state election to Native Hawaiians. This decision does not stand for the proposition that Native Hawaiians are non-indigenous people.

The 1978 Constitutional Convention, or ConCon as it is known in Hawaii, also laid the ground work for the return of some federal lands to Native Hawaiians, including the island of Kahoolawe, which is currently held in trust for a future Native Hawaiian governing entity. The ConCon also designated the Hawaiian language along with English as the official state languages of Hawaii for the first time since the overthrow in 1893.

I was in the Hawaii State Legislature when we approved creation of Hawaiian language immersion schools, recognizing that language is an integral part of a culture and people. The Hawaiian language was in danger of disappearing. Public Hawaiian language preschools, called Punana Leo, were started in 1984. We now have Hawaiian language elementary, middle, and high schools in Hawaii, and a new generation of fluent Hawaiian language speakers are helping to keep this beautiful and culturally important language alive. Other native peoples are looking to the Hawaii model as a means of preserving and perpetuating their native languages.

I believe how we treat our native indigenous people reflects our values and who we are as a country. Clearly, there is much in the history of our interactions with the native people of what is now the United States that makes us less than proud. But one of the great attributes of America has always been the ability to look objectively at our history, learn from it, and when possible, to make amends.

H.R. 2314 is supported by the great majority of Hawaii's residents, by its Republican governor, by our State Legislature, and by dozens of organizations. In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 505, an earlier version of the bill, by a vote of 261 to 153. This was the second time the House had recognized the need for Native Hawaiian self-determination.

The State of Hawaii motto, which was also the motto of the Kingdom of Hawaii, is "Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono," which translates to "the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness." Native Hawaiians, like American Indians and Alaska Natives, have an inherent sovereignty based on their status as indigenous, native people. I urge your support of H.R. 2314.

Mahalo nui loa (thank you very much).