

The Constitution of 1887 - The Bayonet Constitution

During Kalakaua's reign, government spending had risen sharply. The missionary party thought the government spent too much money. However, the king's party thought they should be able to enjoy some of the wealth resulting from the reciprocity treaty.

In January 1887, a group of foreigners formed a secret political group called the Hawaiian League. Most of its members wanted a constitutional monarchy. Some of its members wanted the overthrow of the monarchy and annexation to the United States.

In June the Hawaiian League held a mass meeting. Outside was a military unit, the Hawaiian Rifles. They supposedly served the Hawaiian government, but were secretly controlled by the League.



The king gave in to the League's demands. Even before the mass meeting, he removed one of his most trusted advisors, Walter Gibson. Gibson was disliked by non-Hawaiian leaders of the business community. All of the king's other ministers, resigned along with Gibson. The king agreed to a new cabinet selected by the Committee of Thirteen (made up of members of the Hawaiian League). It included W.L. Green, Godfrey Brown, Lorrin A. Thurston, and Clarence W. Ashford.

Five days after the new cabinet was formed, the members presented the king with a new constitution. This Bayonet Constitution of 1887 was a complete turn around revision of Kamehameha V's Constitution of 1864. After several hours of arguments, Kalakaua signed this document. He had no choice, since the League controlled the military forces.

The constitution took away most of the king's power. He was not allowed to do anything without the approval of the cabinet. He could still appoint the cabinet, but he could not dismiss it without the approval of the legislature. He could not organize any military or naval forces without approval from the legislature.

The new constitution also made important changes in the legislature. The nobles were to be elected instead of appointed by the king. Fewer Hawaiians could vote because of the increase in income and property requirements for voting, as a result, mostly non-Hawaiians would elect the nobles. Any man over twenty who could read and write English, Hawaiian, or a European language and who had lived in Hawaii for one year could vote if he took an oath to uphold the constitution and paid his taxes. This allowed foreigners to vote for representatives' without becoming citizens of Hawaii.

Why did Kalakaua sign this new constitution? He may have felt that he could not remain king unless he signed. Either an overthrow of his government or even his death were possible outcomes if he did not sign. It is called the Bayonet Constitution because people believed the constitution had been forced upon him by the "bayonets" of the Hawaiian Rifles, the military group that was supporting the Hawaiian League.

adapted from, Potter, N.W., Kasdon, L.M., and Rayson, A. History of the Hawaiian Kingdom. Bess Press (2003) and Lowe, R.H., David Kalakaua. Kamehameha Schools Press (1999)