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# Elections in Tonga re-affirm call for change

## Introduction

Australian journalist and researcher Nic Maclellan writes that following public protests in the Kingdom of Tonga in recent years, the re-election of key pro-democracy figures in elections last month ensures that "reform of existing political structures will remain high on the agenda". Tonga, notes Maclellan, "is largely ignored by Australia's media, except in moments of crisis like 16/11 - even though the deployment of Australian troops and police in support of the Tongan authorities in November 2006 has set a significant precedent for operations by the ADF and AFP in support of the government and monarchy in Tonga." He concludes that "the Australian government's attitude to democratic reform in Tonga will be a significant factor in the changes to come."

## Essay: Elections in Tonga re-affirm call for change

On 24 April, over 67,000 voters in the Kingdom of Tonga were registered to vote for nine People's Representatives for the country's Legislative Assembly. The 28 men who hold Tonga's 33 noble titles met the day before, to choose the nine noble members of the Assembly.

The re-election of key members of the Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement (FIHRDM) means they will continue to play a central role in debates over reform of the Kingdom's parliament and constitution - even though they face charges of sedition after major riots in the capital Nuku'alofa in November 2006.

On the main island of Tongatapu, FIHRDM members 'Akilisi Pohiva (with 11,290 votes), 'Isileli Pulu (7,048) and Clive Edwards (6,697) easily won the three People's Representatives (PR) seats. Pohiva and Edwards even increased their tally in comparison to the last election in 2005. 'Ulitu Uata retained his Ha'apai No.1 PR seat, with the Ha'apai No.2 PR seat going to Teisina Fuko of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). However Lepolo Taunisila, the only female PR in the last parliament, lost her seat in the Niua electorate along with PRs in other outer island constituencies.

In the nobles' election on 23 April, the former speaker of the Legislative Assembly Hon. Tu'iha'angana lost his place on Ha'apai to Hon Tu'ipelehake (the King's cousin). Hon. Fielakepa (a

former Lord Chamberlain) and Hon. Ma'afu (a former *aide de camp* to the monarch) both won seats on Tongatapu.

The PR results were a surprise for many commentators who had predicted that voters would punish the pro-democracy movement because of their alleged involvement in the events of "16/11" - when rioting and arson in Nuku'alofa led to widespread destruction of businesses and public buildings in the central business district on 16 November 2006. As well as over 800 young people charged with criminal offences, a number of People's Representatives were charged with sedition and other offences in the aftermath of the riots. After initial hearings in 2007, the sedition trials for Pohiva, Pulu, Edwards, Uata and Taunisila have been postponed until August this year, following the coronation of King Siaosi (George) Tupou V, who acceded to power after the death of his father Taufa'ahau Tupou IV on 11 September 2006.

Pohiva and other FIHRDM members won support on Tongatapu through longstanding personal ties at village level, campaigning through kava clubs and community associations. They capitalised on public concern over a mixture of issues, including rising prices, the introduction of new vehicle taxes, the government's restrictions on pre-election broadcasting on the state-run Tonga Broadcasting Commission, and recent Cabinet decisions (including the retention of the Minister of Tourism after allegations of corruption, and the forced resignation of the Minister of Finance).

With the re-election of Pohiva and other pro-democracy figures, reform of existing political structures will remain high on the agenda. Pohiva and other PRs can still lose their seats if convicted of sedition, but issues of leadership and representation in government remain central to public life in the Kingdom. The King and nobles recognise that change is still on the agenda - after the elections, spokesman for the nobles Hon. Luani told the *Matangi Tonga* news service that the elected nobles all have adequate skills and experience "vital for an active participant who will be discussing the political reform issues in Parliament."

## Political reform

A major public service strike in 2005 and the 2006 riots are a reflection of broader movements for change in the Kingdom.

Tongan society is highly stratified by rank and lineage, with a monarch who has wide-ranging authority over customary and contemporary governance. The King is supported by a hereditary group of estate holders, the *nopele* or nobles, with power over both resources (especially land) and opportunities for monopolies or privileges in the business sector. Tonga has a highly centralised political system under the monarchy, which retains executive power without many of the conventions that restrain a ruler in other constitutional monarchies. The 1875 Tongan Constitution reinforces the power of the monarch and nobility through provisions on succession, inheritance laws, land tenure etc. As well as the powers detailed in the Constitution, the King has significant authority derived from his rank in traditional chiefly descent.

A crucial - and controversial - feature of Tonga's parliamentary system is that the executive Cabinet is responsible to the King rather than the legislature. The Prime Minister and Cabinet members are currently appointed by the King rather than chosen by and from Members of Parliament. The Cabinet runs day to day government affairs, but the King chairs the Privy Council as the highest executive authority, which includes the Prime Minister, Ministers of the Crown and the two Governors of the outer islands of Vava'u and Ha'apai. Under the Constitution, the King retains extensive powers and can act unilaterally without the advice of Ministers: to make treaties, veto legislation, summon or dissolve the Assembly and declare martial law.

For many years, Tonga's democracy movement has proposed changes to representation in the parliament, a unicameral Legislative Assembly with 32 seats:

- 14 seats for cabinet ministers sitting ex officio
- nine seats for nobles elected by their peers
- nine People's Representatives (PRs) elected by popular vote.

The call for political change has been influenced by events since the 1980s, including mismanagement of the public service, allegations of corruption by members of government and the Royal family, and evidence of poor policy decisions. Even in a conservative, Christian society, democracy campaigners like 'Akilisi Pohiva have won support because of frustration that there are limited avenues for participation in governance – even the Kingdom's current Strategic Development Plan acknowledges that there is “widespread dissatisfaction with the accountability, transparency and predictability of government.”

Public protests on a range of issues have increased in recent years: in mid-2005 there were mass rallies over the King's business investments in the Shoreline company (which controls the privatised electricity system); a farmers' protest over the new consumption tax; and a 10,000 strong rally calling for the dismissal of the then Prime Minister, Prince Ulukalala Lavaka 'Ata (the younger brother of the current King). A six-week public servants strike in July – September 2005 led to significant pay increases. By the end of the dispute, which had begun on industrial issues, strikers were raising issues related to political and constitutional reform, and even calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister.

Prince Lavaka 'Ata resigned as Prime Minister in 2006, leading to the appointment by the King of Feleti (Fred) Sevele, the first commoner ever to hold the position. Sevele, a leading businessman in Tonga, had been a supporter of the pro-democracy movement for many years when he was appointed as Prime Minister – however his relations with the FIHRDM soured over the next two years.

In spite of 'Akilisi Pohiva's call for faster change, the Tongan government actively defends its record on reform. In October 2004, the late King had approved the creation of the National Committee of the Kingdom of Tonga on Political Reform (NCPR), which co-ordinated a series of meetings in Tonga and overseas on potential reform of Parliamentary and political structures and on broader economic and social issues of concern. Under recent governments, there have been significant changes, including the first woman appointed as a Cabinet minister in 2006 and the launching of a review of land laws for women. The government has created new institutions such as an Anti-Corruption Commission, a Public Service Commission and introduced changes to the Nationality Act to allow dual citizenship.

On the accession to power of the new monarch in 2006, the Office of the Lord Chamberlain issued a statement that the new King had expressed his support for gradual reform based on “extensive public consultation”, that the monarchy would be “an agent of change” and that he would accept advice from Parliament about the choice of Prime Minister and that “Cabinet ministers now come to office only on the advice of the Prime Minister rather than through the exclusive power of the Monarch.”

Since then there has been ongoing public debate about reform to the parliament and constitution. Following the consultations of the NCPR, a subsequent Tripartite Committee chaired by the noble Hon. Luani and the political debate around 16/11, proposals for parliamentary and constitutional reform are now scheduled to be implemented by 2010. These include plans for the accountability of

government to the legislature, as well as proposals to increase to 17 the number of PRs to be elected to the Legislative Assembly, together with nine nobles and four nominees of the King.

These changes come at a time when many Tongans seek greater access to information, and improved communication by government to citizens. The Tongan Constitution promotes freedom of the press, with the liberty of all people to speak, write and print their opinions. But in practice, the democracy movement and media have struggled for more than twenty years to protect freedom of expression, with the newspaper *Taimi 'o Tonga* and 'Akilisi Pohiva's news sheet *Kele'a* facing repeated bans and defamation suits.

Faced with lively – and often defamatory – debate around the kava bowl and on the Internet, the Sevele government moved to regulate the state media in the lead up to the 2008 elections. The board of the Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC), chaired by the Prime Minister, imposed pre-election bans on TBC journalists presenting programs with candidates' speeches, in an attempt to control the messages of candidates.

Traditional respect paid to people of rank and lineage has long reinforced support for the monarchy and nobility in Tonga. But there are countervailing influences, with Tongan families interconnected to a global diaspora through “transnational corporations of kin” and modern communications technology. The scale of the turn-out for this year's coronation in late July and August will be a signal of popular attitudes towards reform.

## **Economic reform and workers' resistance**

Political debate has been accompanied by more controversial changes to the economy. A key plank of the Sevele government's agenda has been public sector reform and promotion of the private sector as a way of addressing the Kingdom's economic woes. With weak service delivery in key sectors like water, health and transport, the Sevele government responded with a major program to restructure and downsize the public service. Major reforms include the creation of new national integrity systems, attempts to corporatise and privatise public utilities and accession to the WTO and regional trade agreements.

But there is ongoing struggle over who will bear the cost of these policies, at a time when there have been significant price rises for basic goods and services, including bread prices, electricity and school fees (in February, electricity prices rose 20 per cent for consumers on Tongatapu, and up to 23 per cent in the outer islands).

The drive for public sector reform has been widely criticised for its pace, lack of consultation and for failing to meet social objectives. Civil society leaders, while acknowledging the need to improve the public service, have raised concern that the reform process is too focussed on costs rather than social outcomes. Union leaders were critical of the government's voluntary redundancy program in 2006, where over 800 people including many skilled teachers and health workers left the public service.

Redundancies in the public service and the corporatisation of key public utilities have not necessarily meant improved service delivery. Privatisation of government-owned companies has been slow with few overseas buyers, and the government is currently considering re-purchase of electricity generation and distribution, which has been run by Shoreline (a company owned by the King and business associates). The country does not have the regulatory capacity to control the behaviour of private sector operators, a problem compounded where members of the Royal Family have major investments in public utilities like energy, transport and telecommunications (When the King acceded to power in 2006, the Lord Chamberlain announced that he would dispose of “all his

commercial interests in Tonga...in conformity with the obligations and demands of his high office”, but this process is still incomplete).

In a country with constrained economic options and limited natural resources, Tonga's economy is reliant on significant diaspora populations in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. Overseas Tongans play a crucial role in improving household livelihoods through provision of remittances in cash or goods - in 2006, remittances amounted to an estimated 32.3 per cent of Tonga's GDP, the largest percentage for all countries in East Asia and the Pacific.

Tonga, Samoa and Kiribati were the first Pacific countries to be visited by the Rudd government's new Parliamentary Secretaries for Aid (Bob McMullen) and Pacific Island Affairs (Duncan Kerr) - a significant signal that small island states would not be forgotten by the Australian government.

But Tonga is largely ignored by Australia's media, except in moments of crisis like 16/11 - even though the deployment of Australian troops and police in support of the Tongan authorities in 2006 has set a significant precedent for operations by the ADF and AFP in support of the government and monarchy in Tonga. Ongoing training operations for police (and also the proposed paramilitary Corps of Watchmen) have important human rights implications, following a series of allegations after 16/11 that detainees had been mistreated and beaten by Tongan soldiers and police officers.

The Rudd government is developing new policies on climate change, seasonal workers, labour mobility and development aid, all of which impact on the Kingdom of Tonga. With its greater focus on Papua New Guinea and RAMSI in Solomon Islands, the Australian government's attitude to democratic reform in Tonga will be a significant factor in the changes to come, as the April 2008 elections have signalled that the pace of change in the Kingdom will escalate in coming years.

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Nic Maclellan has worked as a journalist, researcher and development worker in the Pacific. He is the project researcher for the Nautilus Institute Australian Forces Abroad Briefing Books [Australia in Solomon Islands](#), [Australia in Tonga](#), and [Australia in the Pacific Islands](#). He is the author of *La France dans le Pacifique - de Bougainville à Moruroa* (Editions la Decouverte, Paris, 1992), [After Moruroa - France in the South Pacific](#), (with Jean Chesnaux) (Ocean Press, 1997), [Louise Michel: Rebel Lives](#), (Ocean Press, 2004), [Australian neo-colonialism in the Pacific: Human Rights implications](#), (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 2003), and *Kirisimasi* (with Losena Tubanavau-Salabula and Josua M. Namoce and [Pacific Concerns Resource Centre](#), (PCRC, Suva, 1999), a history of the Fijian soldiers and sailors who witnessed Britain's nuclear tests in the Pacific in the 1950s. Email: [nicmaclellan@optusnet.com.au](mailto:nicmaclellan@optusnet.com.au)

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