the project: “Re-empowering our elders, strengthening the villages as the foundation of the nation, and economic development, leading to returning the spirit of self-help and to the greatest extent possible, the legacy from our forefathers, are the three central themes of the modern house of Tokelau” (General Fono 1999). Time may be the chief witness to the fulfillment of these aspirations.

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References


TONGA

The most important event of the year turned out not to be Tonga’s claim to be the first country in the world to witness the new millennium. This bid was hotly contested and, if worldwide media coverage is considered the judge, won by Kiribati in any case. Rather, it was the 3 January appointment as prime minister of the king’s youngest son, HRH Prince ‘Ulukalala-Lavaka-Ata. The prince, who is in his forties, is married to the eldest daugh-

ter of the retiring premier, seventynine-year-old Baron Vaea, and has a teenage daughter and two sons. As the Crown Prince remains unmarried, the new prime minister or his eldest son conceivably could succeed to the throne. The prime minister has been educated overseas, his latest degrees being in strategic policy and international relations gained at master’s level from universities in the Australian Capital Territory and in Queensland. His appointment to office appears to be in line with the wishes of the Crown Prince, who declined the post largely because he would not have been able to appoint his own cabinet ministers, a prerogative that belongs to the reigning monarch. Instead, the older brother will concentrate on his business affairs and undertake other activities on behalf of his aging father, who turned eighty-two on 4 July 2000. Hopefully, his younger brother will give youthful momentum to government leadership. Although it was rather a surprise, the last six months has shown the appointment to be a popular and effective one.

The major political issue continues to be the state of the economy. The last elections showed a decline in fervor regarding the movement toward democracy in favor of elected representatives who were more likely to come to grips with the problems of the struggling private sector. While tourism has shown some progress and, during the widely touted millennial celebrations, made some gain from Tonga’s location on the International Dateline, most other major industries, except fisheries, are showing little progress. The tertiary sector has
grown at a greater rate than other sectors over the last ten years, due mainly to the addition of two commercial banks, and businesses belonging to the Crown Prince, the Princess Royal, and a few prominent commoners. Agriculture appears in decline as far as the value of production for both the local and export markets is concerned. Both of the “hopefuls,” tourism and fisheries, need substantial investment from overseas to realize their potential. It is widely hoped that the new prime minister, with or without his brother’s guidance, will be able to provide ideas, confidence, and cohesion in a more concerted and, importantly, a more coordinated, push for economic growth.

Just before the conclusion of the year under review and after much discussion, the Tongan parliament finally passed a T$43 million budget. Following a cabinet decision in May, an estimated T$3.5-to-4 million of it will be spent on a 20 percent increase in the cost-of-living allowance for all civil servants. This is the first major raise they have had for six years. Since 1989, two cost-of-living allowance increases have been awarded: one of 10 percent on 1 November 1995, and another of 5 percent on 1 July 1999. There is some speculation as to where the money for the salary increases will be found. The government announced it would make up the amount through cost-cutting and savings brought about by a more economical management of resources and a greater efficiency in its operations, especially in the collection of revenue arrears.

This optimism and, indeed, the entire budget were questioned in the Legislative Assembly. Dr Fred Sevele, the Tongatapu Number 2 People’s Representative, asked how the government can afford a pay hike for public servants when, just a few months ago, the outgoing prime minister said the country was on the verge of bankruptcy. He fears that the government will be forced to curtail its services to meet the projected pay raise, 10 percent of which will be awarded from 1 July 2000, and 10 percent from 1 January 2001. Minister of Finance the Honorable K T Fakafanua replied that the economy is growing by 6.1 percent. Sevele said that he had no indication from the Tongan business community that the economy was growing at such a rate. “Obviously, the two statements from the [finance] minister and the former prime minister cannot both be true,” he said (TG, 22 June 2000, 20).

Indeed, the way the figures are presented makes for some confusion and ambiguity of interpretation. The budget statement for 2000–01 reports that the Tongan economy achieved an average annual growth rate of 2.8 percent over the last six years, an improvement over the previous five years. The 1999–2000 fiscal year was estimated to show a growth rate of 6.1 percent (in real terms), an increase from 4.6 percent recorded in 1998–99. The economy, furthermore, is projected to increase by 2 percent in 2000–01 (TG, 8 June 2000, Kalonikali Budget Supplement, 4). Presumably, these calculations arrive at the quoted figure of over 6 percent.

During this period, the government will undertake also a T$14 million program loan from the Asia Development Bank designed to encourage private sector-led economic growth,
through policies conducive to increased investment and employment, and to improve the delivery of services by the public sector. The program will review the current civil service capacity and remuneration. As a result, argued the minister, it is vital for the government and the country at large to employ and maintain a competent and highly qualified civil service. Hence the raise in pay, presumably to prevent a trickle of top-level civil servants to the private sector. The loan will be used in part to finance the government’s taking over of responsibility for telecommunication services following the close of the Cable and Wireless contract period, which coincided with the end of the current political and financial year.

Koliniasi Afuha’amango, the seventy-two-year-old People’s Representative for Vava’u, who after repeated tries finally entered parliament in a by-election held on 18 May to replace the late William Harris, was heard to remark that the Asian Development Bank loan would merely float the civil service pay raise. The minister of finance failed to rise to this jibe.

Mr Afuha’amango works for the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement, of which he has been a long-time supporter. The movement has not promoted a high public profile since it failed to gain the overwhelming victory that it expected in the last general elections held at the beginning of 1999. Sadly, also, its influential intellectual proponent, the redoubtable Futa Helu, has not enjoyed good health this past year. The future of the movement as a significant social force overall remains in doubt.

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References