

The 1990 Election in Tonga

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Politics in Tonga is never easy to follow, and the world remains uninformed on the real nature of political events there. Since 1986, the political environment has changed very quickly.¹ One result of the February 1990 election was a rush of rumor including that of a possible coup. This was symptomatic of the local population sensing change in the air. The coup stories were reported in New Zealand, and some comment appeared in the Australian press. Unfortunately, it was difficult to obtain a true picture of the course of events from naturally conservative Tongan sources, so there was no subsequent follow-up or analysis. The rumors died, and with them the news stories.

Events related to the election would be unimportant if they had no wider significance. But they do, in that they reveal new trends in modern Tonga, and demonstrate the growing influence of outside events and ideas upon the evolution of one of the most insular Pacific societies. One might say that if these influences are at work in Tonga, Pacific ideals and lifestyles are indeed changing fast.

THE TONGA PARLIAMENT

The Tonga Parliament was established by the Constitution of 1875 (Latu-kefu 1975) and is unicameral. Each parliament sits for three years between general elections. Members of Parliament meet for six months in each year, usually from mid-May to October or November. The Parliament consists of three groups: Cabinet ministers, nobles' representatives, and people's representatives. The proportions of each have been amended over the years by ministerial appointment as well as by constitutional amend-

ment. At the time Parliament was dissolved in 1989, there were eleven Cabinet members, including the prime minister; nine nobles' representatives; and nine people's representatives. Cabinet, of course, sits independently, and when the King presides, becomes the Privy Council, the highest executive body. The Parliament of Tonga is named the Legislative Assembly. The word *parliament* is used throughout this paper because of its accepted international use.

Cabinet members, including the prime minister, are appointed by the monarch, without a specified term of service. Members of the Cabinet seldom retire, and, as a result, many ministers have held Cabinet positions for more than a generation. Cabinet is a mix of appointments from the nobility and of well-qualified commoners. The people's representatives stand for election every three years, on a geographic constituency basis, and the turnover is often quick. Because Tongan society does not allow direct questioning of social superiors, the role of commoner parliamentarians has been more one of supplication than of opposition. Nobles' representatives are elected from among, and by, the noble titleholders, also for three-year terms on the same geographic constituency basis. Because there are only thirty-three noble families, most nobles can have a turn in Parliament if they want one, and the election system can encompass informal arrangements to secure seats. But this is by no means always what happens.

The balance of power in the Parliament is not as clear-cut as the numbers suggest. Both nobles' and people's representatives can and do divide over issues, and combined they can stop government business. Each group in Parliament is able to claim, when it fails to win on any issue, that it is an ineffective minority. Neither the King nor the prime minister can act by fiat, although foreigners often think they can. Outside the Parliament it is obvious that nobles, who are also traditional leaders and were senior chiefs before 1875, wield considerable influence and, where legislation is weak or nonexistent, can act in an imperious manner. However, this has become increasingly difficult as commoners become more aware of their constitutional rights and of the capacity of the courts to protect the individual.

When in session, the Parliament sits daily from 10 AM. Each parliamentary year begins with a budget debate. Cabinet or Privy Council meets weekly (a regent is usually appointed when the King is overseas). Because the Parliament meets for six months consecutively, members have to be

away from their constituents for half the year. In all its proceedings the Tonga Parliament closely follows the Westminster system. It has a Speaker and a chairman of committees, who acts for the Speaker when necessary. A daily account of parliamentary proceedings is available for a minimal charge. A very detailed record, the proceedings are published only in Tongan and do not include work of the Committee of the House. Since 1987, there has been a daily radio report on activity in the Parliament.

BACKGROUND TO THE 1990 GENERAL ELECTION

The previous Parliament, dissolved in 1986, had experienced paroxysms in its final months, following significant changes to the taxation system of Tonga. In July 1986, a sales tax had been introduced simultaneously with income tax reductions, resulting in short-term inflation of up to 30 per cent. A large proportion of the population did not pay income tax and did not see commensurate savings from the reductions. Pockets were hard hit, and the parliamentary representatives were sent on official consultative visits to explain the policy changes in the villages. To do this, the parliamentarians were permitted to draw enormous allowances for overtime. This was publicized in a new and, at that time, underground quarterly newspaper, *Kele'a*. Two Tongans involved closely with *Kele'a*, 'Akilisi Pohiva and Laki Niu, were elected to the Parliament in the 1987 election. Both have university education and were elected on the issue of parliamentary abuses.

With such new blood coming into the House, the 1987–1989 Parliament was very active. There were innovations in procedure: for example, in order to inform themselves on issues, parliamentarians made visits to outer islands and to government and quasi-government institutions. In particular, within the Parliament there developed a forceful debate on issues of public accountability. In the course of this, some of the people's representatives spoke in terms that were widely regarded as impolite and therefore un-Tongan, at least when used about nobles and ministers appointed by the Crown.

The climax to the session came in the last few months of the Parliament when there was a walkout of the people's representatives from 13 to 26 September. Members had become increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of ministerial answers on issues of public interest. Ministers were sometimes evasive in answers and appeared to members to use international

travel as a means of avoiding parliamentary responsibility. In response, on 13 September, all the people's representatives who were present walked out. The majority returned only on the day they would have forfeited their seats. During the walkout, radio interviews with Tongan citizens at large indicated widespread support among the younger generation for the action their representatives had taken. But there was evidence of a backlash among older people, suggesting that, at least in public, they did not wish to be associated with what was recognized as a fairly radical action.

When they returned to Parliament on 26 September after their walkout, the people's representatives introduced and requested a vote on a parliamentary motion calling for a redistribution of seats in their favor. Their first request, for a reduction in the number of nobles' representatives, was defeated and a second request, for an increase in people's representatives, was withdrawn when it became obvious that it would be defeated also. Not long after, on 29 October, the King closed the Parliament, and the scene was set for the 1989–1990 election campaign.

As the election approached, Tonga appeared to be a divided nation. Signs indicated that the campaign would be a bitter one.

THE ELECTION ISSUE

Regional and international press and radio reports at the time interpreted the 1990 election result as a challenge to the traditional order, but this interpretation resulted from a dearth of knowledge of the real events in the Parliament. An election in Tonga can encompass many issues, but the outcome of this one showed that only accountability was really significant. To understand this, it is necessary to know that public and parliamentary accountability had been sensitive issues during the 1987–1989 Parliament. In those years, three issues were debated over and over: parliamentary allowances, passport sales, and national financial management. On each issue, people's representatives thought the ministers responsible either evasive or misleading. Ministers could not be brought to account.

Parliamentary Allowances

In Tonga, parliamentary allowances became an issue after disclosures following village consultations on tax-law changes in 1986. The disclosures were a consequence of the Tonga system of payment to ministers and other parliamentarians that provides a basic salary of between T\$27,000

for ministers and T\$10,000 for members² (*Kele'a*, May–June, 1989). However, in the course of a parliamentary session this is supplemented by overtime payments. A member is paid a full daily allowance for each hour of overtime worked after 5 PM. The Parliament frequently sits late into the evening. In addition, for overseas travel, significant daily allowances are paid to ministers (T\$300–500 per day) and somewhat less to other parliamentarians (T\$200–400). Following disclosures about overtime payments in May–June 1989, *Kele'a* published a list of total annual payments made to ministers and parliamentarians showing, for example, that some ministers had received close to or more than T\$100,000 in salary and allowances during a single year. Of course, the highest incomes went to those who traveled frequently and therefore were infrequently in the House. None of these payments was illegal; the issue was that they were excessive.

The *Kele'a* report made information public that was previously only in the parliamentary domain. Although figures revealed that the Parliament consumed some 2 percent of Tonga's GDP, concerned parliamentarians were unable to get sensible debate on the issue. 'Akilisi Pohiva tried to get the court involved over payments made to the minister for Police, but the judgment noted that parliamentary allowances were an issue for the Parliament to decide. In Parliament, most ministers and parliamentarians did not wish to pursue an issue that would affect their incomes. It was therefore left to subtle leaks of information, usually in *Kele'a*, to inform the public about the moral climate within which the finances of parliamentarians were established.

Passport Sales

Although many Tongans were quietly amused by the revelations about parliamentary allowances, they were confused and uninformed on the issue of passport sales. In 1982, Tonga had introduced, by Act of Parliament, a Tongan Protected Persons Passport as a mechanism for raising much needed foreign exchange. Sales were never at more than a low level, for a T\$10,000 fee each. The passports were not widely recognized, and revenues from sales were not shown in budget papers. Most sales appear to have been to Chinese, through the Tonga Consulate in Hong Kong.

During 1989, 'Akilisi Pohiva came across information that he claimed showed another type of Tonga passport could be bought through a naturalization process for about T\$35,000. This raised issues of legality and

constitutionality and he, with professional assistance from a Tongan lawyer from New Zealand, Nelson Tupou, took the ministers for Police and Finance to court. The legal issue concerned whether or not these sales were legislated for, and the constitutional issue was whether foreigners could be granted citizenship by any mechanism other than royal assent. The case has yet to be heard in the courts.

The parliamentary issue was that a parliamentarian had to take both ministers to court because they would not answer questions in Parliament. In the early stages of the case, the suit against the finance minister was dismissed because passport revenue was judged a parliamentary matter. In the Parliament, the people's representatives found it impossible to go further. As the matter became publicized, the government did reveal that a substantial sum (about T\$5 million) had been raised and subsequently transferred to Tonga government accounts with the Bank of America. Ministerial reluctance to deal with the matter in public fueled speculation that the sums involved were even larger than reported and that other money remained to be accounted for (MT, March–May 1990, 20).

Financial Management

In general terms, people's representatives in the Parliament had become increasingly concerned about the management of public finances. The minister responsible was clearly in a very uncomfortable position, managing a limited budget heavily subsidized by foreign aid and remittance payments from Tongans living overseas. Although national statistics had been spotty and published very late, it was well known that only 30 percent of national income was generated domestically. In these difficult circumstances, national financial management had often been concerned with finding quick ways of raising foreign exchange. Passport sales and licensing offshore banks had been two of these. Neither had been particularly well researched and both eventually embarrassed the government. An observer would have to have some sympathy for any minister in these circumstances, especially if the minister lacked the social rank in the Tongan system to be able to refuse the demands of other ministers.

In August 1988, the Parliament spent several days discussing a motion of impeachment directed at the minister for Finance. People's Representative 'Akilisi Pohiva listed fifty-two causes of concern, which, he claimed, indicated a need for the minister's dismissal. These included illegal expen-

ditures to parliamentarians, abuse of the system of special warrant, and failure to disclose earnings from passport sales. The impeachment motion was not accepted by the House and later Pohiva made personal representations to the King. Although he had hoped to have support from other members, he found himself making his representations alone. No further action was taken on the impeachment issue.

Kele'a, in 1989, claimed that the minister for Finance had informed the Cabinet that a down-turn in foreign reserves was a serious problem, while he simultaneously informed the Parliament that he was satisfied with the state of the economy. Parliamentarians claimed that he was misleading them on an important national issue. On several occasions he was not in the House to answer questions on his portfolio. Finally, his refusal to cancel intended international travel, in order, it seemed, not to answer questions on the state of the economy, triggered the walkout of people's representatives in September 1989. The crisis came to a climax because he appeared to evade what others saw as his responsibility to answer parliamentary questions.

These issues were still in the air when Parliament was closed on 29 October 1989. Many Tongans saw these disputes only as problems in the nuts and bolts of day-to-day government, or connected with the personalities in the Parliament. For example, a deep-seated animosity existed between 'Akilisi Pohiva and the police minister. Fundamentally, these difficulties resulted from the deeply held convictions of the participants about where their respective responsibilities lay and about the person or group to whom each was accountable.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Tongan Constitution provides for a constitutional monarchy, on the Westminster model. The Constitution was constructed by King Tupou I and the Reverend Shirley Baker, and was promulgated in 1875 (Latukefu 1975). Despite its history, in terms of ministerial accountability it differs in important ways from other Westminster-based systems. This difference has been a significant cause of recent parliamentary discontent in Tonga.

Because Tonga's ministers are not chosen from among members of Parliament elected either by constituencies or by members of political parties, their responsibility is not to the Parliament but to the monarch. This has

two effects. One is that ministers feel a real and personal obligation to undertake the King's (or Queen's) command, an obligation no doubt supported by degrees of self-interest. Second, ministers show some disdain for explaining actions in Parliament, especially when what is at issue is a private and confidential commitment to the monarch's wishes.

In addition, the prime minister also is chosen and appointed by the monarch and therefore does not command the political allegiance of Cabinet colleagues in a manner that would be expected in a system of government based on political parties. The prime minister is one among equals in the Cabinet, although he may not be in terms of his personal rank in the Tongan hierarchy. In the present Cabinet, where the prime minister is the King's brother, he has exalted personal rank. As a result, the function of the prime minister's position is quite unlike that in a party-dominated system.

The accountability issue is confused also by the Tongans' claim that they all have accountable relationships through bloodlines (eg, Martin 1817). As a result, it is widely held that there is a broad net of support and mutual responsibility. Relationships involve reciprocal accountability upward and downward in real moral and economic ways. In a sense, the idea of formal parliamentary responsibility is foreign to the society, and it is arguable that such responsibility is necessary only if the traditional system is weakened. Thus, the people's representatives, in searching for parliamentary accountability, are asking questions about the effectiveness of traditional ways of addressing grievances. It is not clear whether they are responding to change, or causing it.

The issue of to whom a minister is accountable is at the core of Tonga's current political debate. To some extent the problems have been caused by personalities, but the root is in the Constitution and in changing attitudes to the mechanism of ministerial appointment. In modern Tonga, among parliamentarians, only members of the Cabinet have regular and routine access to the King, and as a result it is unclear how informed he can be on day-to-day matters, because he usually hears only one side of an issue. Therefore, gaps exist in the chain of responsibility. One is between the King and the people at large, the other is between ministers and the Parliament. The latter gap has been exacerbated by some evidence of irresponsible behavior. The more youthful and educated new parliamentarians have noticed this and are seeking to remedy the situation.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Electioneering in Tonga tends to disappear underground, a result of each candidate having to travel extensively, often between islands, covering their constituencies in a very personal way through meetings in kava circles and other social groups. The constituencies are dispersed, and the constituents in the rural areas are uninformed and tend to be more conservative. The media are weakly developed and have not, in previous elections, been particularly important. Among the newspapers, only the government-owned *Tonga Chronicle* gets wide distribution. Its general news coverage is weak, and it carries virtually no political comment. In the weeks before the 1990 election, only a limited range of people outside Nuku'alofa knew much about the parliamentary activity that had taken place over the previous months.

Before the mid-eighties, candidates took a very personal approach to campaigning. Personalities and local issues were paramount. In a society where gift giving is widespread and has an important social function, there was always an element of informal and well-intentioned material persuasion. As the 1989–90 campaign got underway, it was not clear how far candidates speaking on complex issues of accountability could go in creating a different attitude in an electorate that was unaccustomed to detailed knowledge of parliamentary matters and public affairs.

By mid-December 1989, an important change was in the air. There was a move by the more conservative end of the political spectrum to enroll church support on a “church and state” platform. This move had support from the articulate noble Fusitu'a, who had been elected in earlier parliaments but had lost his seat in the 1987 election to the King's second son, Ma'atu. Fusitu'a is a member of the Anti-Communist League. This group wished to nominate a member of the royal family as a people's representative candidate for Tongatapu, a move for which there was a precedent: the prime minister's daughter Siu'ilikutapu sat in Parliament from 1978 to 1980. These moves, to coordinate an approach to the election campaign, were very significant, demonstrating genuine concern about the way the election might go. It was perhaps the first indication of an element of panic on the conservative side.

The introduction of a royal candidate could have been a clever move. It would have divided the opposition, bringing obligations of traditional

loyalty and respect into the campaign, but it would have been extremely embarrassing for supporters if the royal candidature had failed. That neither the church nor the royal family was prepared to become involved in the proposal indicates their acumen. Importantly, the move to something like a party came from the Right. Tonga has never had political parties—they have been seen as divisive—and it is arguable that they are unnecessary in such a small society. The Left was unlikely to move to form a party as it would have been seen as subversive and un-Tongan. That the Right chose to make the first move has opened the door to the Left to make a similar one. It may have changed the nature of Tonga's domestic politics forever.

On Tuesday 29 January, the two sitting members for Ha'apai, Teisina Fuko and Viliami Afeaki, announced that they would stand as a team and would support each other on parliamentary issues. Neither can be described as left-wing activists, but their decision was historic. Both are fundamentally Tongan loyalists but, at times, had become irritated by the failure of ministers to accept accountability on significant issues. Although Fuko had led the parliamentary walkout, it was on his part far more an act of frustration than of sedition. Although both stayed out for the full fourteen days, they moved to involve the churches in a day of prayer for the parliamentarians and the nation, in keeping with a long history of interaction between church and state (eg, Latukefu 1974). Both had worked for compromise and responsible solutions throughout the previous Parliament.

The King does not usually enter the domestic political arena, but in January 1990, in the campaign period, he gave an interview to the local press in celebration of his twenty-fifth year of leadership (published in the privately owned *Matangi Tonga*, Jan–Feb 1990). In the interview he commented forthrightly about the parliamentary walkout and the nature of political change in Tonga. He stated that change could become uncontrollable and might result in a coup d'état. It was an unusual intervention at a sensitive time and no doubt fairly reflects the concerns that occupied the thoughts of many of the most senior members of Tongan society at that time.

The final shots in the public side of the campaign were dramatic. The privately owned *Times of Tonga* carried a headline on 25 January stating that a campaign of fear was intimidating voters by claiming that candidates seeking political change were communists bent on overturning the

Tongan system of government. The claim that such a campaign was taking place was made by Uili Fukofuka, a new candidate in the Tongatapu constituency who was aligned with the group seeking reform and greater accountability. The reports did not make it clear where the campaign was being organized.

Then the head of the 'Atenisi Institute, Futa Helu, was interviewed in the final edition of *Kele'a* before the election. In the interview, he listed the candidates he would recommend to the electorate on the basis that they were contributing to real debate on important issues in Tonga politics. His recommendation was that people vote for the reformist group. Futa Helu's views were nothing new; he had long been a critic of what he called undesirable trends in Tonga's way of government. He was also a nationalist and a teacher of Tongan traditions. His statement was important because it was public and carried in the anti-establishment *Kele'a*. An immediate and vitriolic response came from the candidates who were not nominated in his list, and rebuttals, many of them at a very personal level, were carried in the election-day issue of the *Times of Tonga* (15 February). That issue also carried a thoughtful editorial on the nature of the candidates, pointing out that the election result would send a clear signal to the government about the attitude of the Tongan people to progressive change.

Two days before the election, a writ was filed, seeking to nullify the candidatures of two sitting members, Hopate Sanft and Teisina Fuko, on the grounds of outstanding debts. Both were reformists who had taken part in the walkout of the previous year. The debts were paid a day before the hearing, and the chief justice ordered that the names remain on the ballot papers.

The public campaign was scruffy by Tongan standards. Informed independent Tongans seemed quite perplexed by the campaign as it developed. The outcome of the election was clearly very difficult to predict, and commentators found it hard to assess the mood of the electorate.

There was no question that the outcome was going to provide important signals to the government, and also to the population at large. The election result could take one of three forms. If all members of the reformist group lost their seats, it would indicate they were zealots running ahead of their peers. Traditional respect for values and superiors, fear of change, and natural conservatism would be reinforced. If a reformist group of people's representatives were elected, it would show wide hidden

support for change, albeit in a Tongan way, and would be a result that should worry the government. The executive would note such a result and could be expected to move ahead of the Parliament, perhaps taking the initiative in the process of change. The worst possibility would be an unclear result where both the government and the electorate would be left confused about the reasons for it. The way would then be open for a continuing drift in leadership.

THE ELECTION PROCESS

A general election in Tonga is run carefully and cleanly. On election day 26,227 people exercised their right to vote, a significant proportion of the eligible voters. The voting age is sixteen, and the total population is about 95,000.

Tonga has five constituencies. In the election for people's representatives, the main island, Tongatapu, elects 3 members, Ha'apai and Vava'u 2 each, and 'Eua and the Niuas 1 each, for a total of 9 representatives (Figure 1). Electors may cast as many votes as there are seats in the constituency. Polling stations are set up throughout the islands and are well supervised. Arrangements are made for voters to vote for candidates in their home constituencies, even if they are living elsewhere in the country. The bulk of those living outside their constituencies are in Tongatapu. However, no provision is made to count votes for overseas Tongans, although this is probably some 30,000 people. In 1990, for the first time, voters had the privacy of individual polling booths. Fifty-five candidates stood as people's representatives across all five constituencies.

The nobles' election was held on 14 February, one day before the people's election. The constituency boundaries are the same, but only nobles holding estates in any constituency can stand or vote in it. There are 33 noble titles. At the time of the election, 3 titles were vacant. As a result only 30 titleholders were eligible to vote for the nine available seats. Of these, a small minority were overseas at the time of the election and therefore could not vote.

THE ELECTION RESULT

The election result for the people's representatives was a landslide in favor of the reformist group. The numbers in the result were quite extraordi-

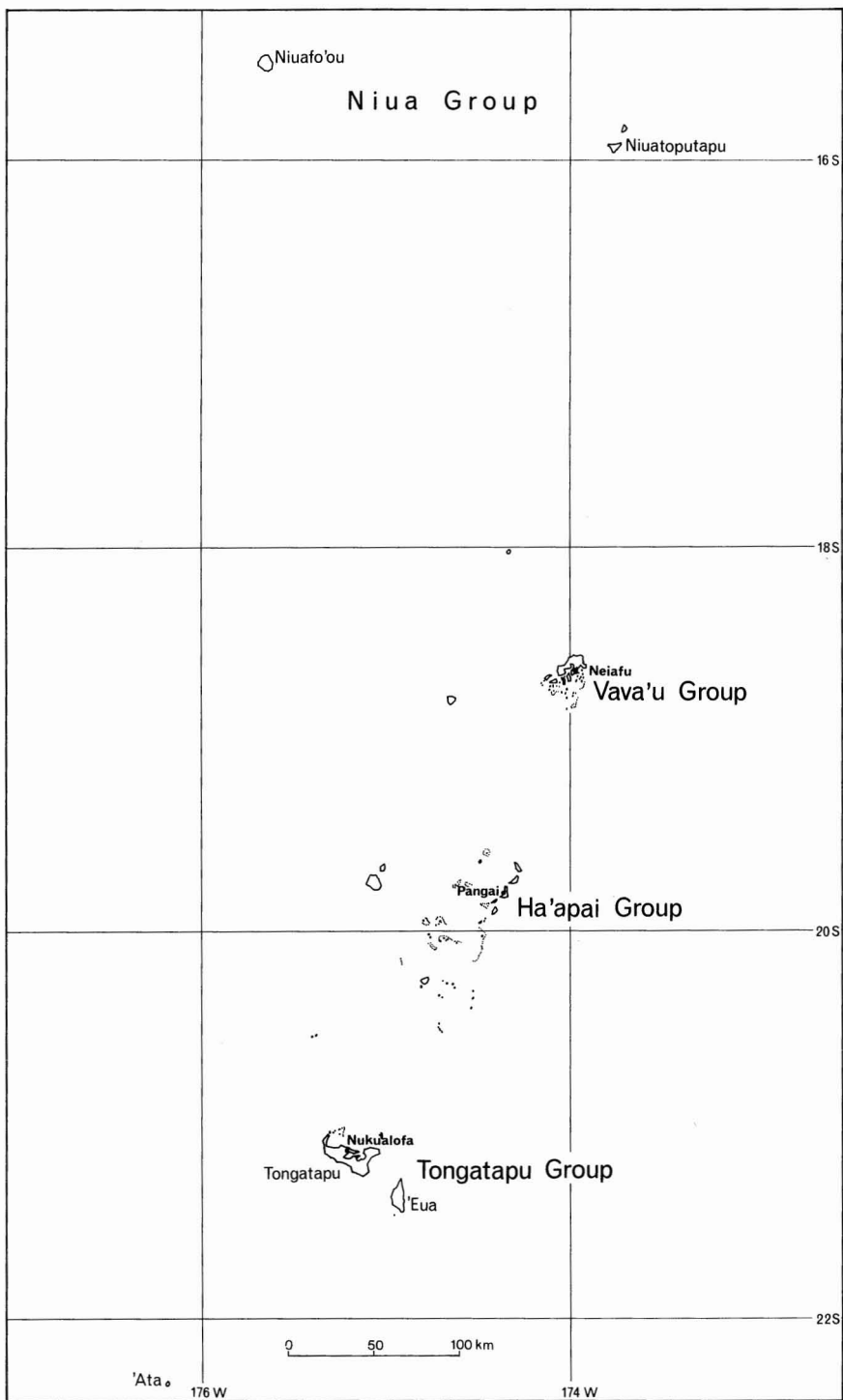


FIGURE 1. Kingdom of Tonga election constituencies.

nary, and the new field of representatives is an important signal to the government.

The total votes cast for the first three candidates in Tongatapu, 26,102, was 67 percent of the total votes cast in the constituency. All these candidates were reformists. In Ha'apai, the old reformists were re-elected with 57 percent of the vote. The nine candidates elected took 53 percent of all votes cast (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the 1990 Elections in Tonga, by constituency

	Votes cast	Comments
<i>Tongatapu</i> (3 seats)		
Samuela 'Akilisi Pohiva	9,441	re-elected
Laki Niu	9,402	re-elected
Viliami Fukofuka	7,259	
Other candidates (18)	12,700	
Tongatapu total	38,802	
<i>Vava'u</i> (2 seats)		
'Atunaisa H. Katoa	2,100	
Siale M. Faletau	1,793	
Other candidates (10)	8,025	
Vava'u total	11,918	
<i>Ha'apai</i> (2 seats)		
Sione Teisina Fuko	2,657	re-elected
Viliami Pousima Afeaki	2,249	re-elected
Other candidates (5)	3,674	
Ha'apai total	8,580	
<i>Niuas</i> (1 seat)		
Siaki Tu'ipulotu Kata	425	
Other candidates (8)	696	
Niuas total	1,121	
<i>Eua</i> (1 seat)		
Moeakiola Takai	939	
Other candidates (5)	984	
'Eua total	1,923	

The voting pattern shows the concentration of votes in the hands of the winning candidates, especially where reformist candidates were standing for re-election. Katoa and Fukofuka were also well-known reformists standing for the first time.

Only four sitting candidates were returned. All were members of the group that had walked out and stayed out of the Parliament in the previous term. None of the members who had refused to take part in the walkout, or had returned early, were re-elected. The three founders of *Kele'a* are now in Parliament: 'Akilisi Pohiva, Viliami Fukofuka (both representing Tongatapu), and Havea Katoa (Vava'u). Laki Niu, closely associated with the group, almost beat Pohiva into first place in Tongatapu. The two Ha'apai representatives, Teisina Fuko and Viliami Afeaki, were both returned. Both are active supporters of accountability in government, but are less outspoken than the Tongatapu group. All other seats turned over. For the first time, all three Tongatapu representatives have tertiary education, and are articulate supporters of reform. However, the battle was not over on election day. The elections of both Teisina Fuko and 'Akilisi Pohiva were challenged in court immediately following the election; both challenges were subject to appeals. The challenge to Pohiva was dismissed, but at the time of writing it was clear that Fuko would have to stand again in a by-election, probably in 1991 (*MT*, June–July, 1990).

With so few voters participating, the nobles' election revealed little about trends in voter thinking. Instead, it demonstrated the capacity for the group to act on personal biases. Two incidents were significant. One was that Baron Tuita, long-time minister for Lands, and deputy prime minister before his retirement in 1988, was not elected for Ha'apai, despite his being an excellent candidate for the position of Speaker (chairman) of the Parliament. He was not elected probably because his ministerial responsibilities encompassed the distribution of fellow nobles' estates in an even-handed way over many years. Malupo, the Speaker in the previous Parliament, was re-elected for Ha'apai and was then re-appointed Speaker despite his being at the center of several noisy sessions in the previous Parliament, when attention was drawn to the allowances he had claimed when traveling to New Zealand for medical treatment. The previous deputy speaker, Veikune, who had shown some sympathy for the reformist people's representatives, did not stand again for Vava'u. His parliamentary position has been taken by Fusitu'a, who played a significant role on the conservative side in the election campaign.

The March–May 1990 issue of *Matangi Tonga* carried a report that the newly elected people's representatives had been targeted by a new underground newsletter, *Tonga Ngaue*. In it they were painted as a radical group fighting for power. The June–July 1990 issue of *Matangi Tonga* reported that the newsletter was started by Topi Tapueluelu (who had stood unsuccessfully in the election), Taniela Ngaluola, and Sioe Faka'osi. Their motives remained unclear. The picture of growing polarization within the society was reinforced by a television interview with the King, recorded in New Zealand, in which he appeared to claim that Pohiva was a communist. Later in Tonga, the king denied the comment. It seems that the segment of the interview was taken out of context and made to appear misleading.

The combination of these events produced an environment in which an unfounded rumor concerning a coup was started by four New Zealanders living with an evangelical church group. The police minister became involved, the New Zealanders were deported, and the story was carried on international news networks. This turn of events deflected the regional press from a detached and sensible analysis of the election result.

THE CHANGING POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Growth in Public Awareness

A widespread feeling exists in Tonga that most people do not take much interest in national politics: they leave it all to the chiefs. The swing to support of the reformist group probably surprised many Tongans because it showed that the assumption of a lack of interest is patronizing, valid only when people are satisfied with the competence of government. It is now clear that most Tongans are very interested, provided they are aware of what is going on. In a country where public debate is inhibited, such a change is difficult to discern until the evidence presents itself. The evidence is now there. Many conservative Tongans will find it hard to believe, and some will not welcome it.

The Need for Government Information

It has been quite clear over recent years that the Tonga government has been its own worst enemy, creating an environment in which it sometimes appears incompetent. At times, some ministers have acted in questionable

ways, but others are very experienced and have accumulated practical wisdom over generations. The government gets little credit for sensible decisions and good government, largely because it does nothing to explain itself. For reasons that are largely traditional, the chiefly classes, who are in the majority in government, do not feel it incumbent upon themselves to explain their actions in public. This is not to say that they will not do so privately and informally. Information is now flowing to the population through a steadily developing media: the government will have to adjust to this if it is to maintain balanced public information. The government now appears to be reacting. An information office is to open within the operations of the prime minister's department (MT, March–May 1990). At present it is not clear whether this is in response to the problems of the period from 1987 to 1990, or whether it flows from the Forum-sponsored meeting on press freedom in the Pacific held in Rarotonga in January–February 1990. Whatever the cause, such an office has the capacity to help the government redeem its reputation.

The Expanding Press

During the last five years, Tonga has not had a comfortable ride with the foreign media. This was caused partly by the difficulty professional journalists had in getting real information from responsible people in Tonga and partly by actions, both governmental and individual, that caught the international media's attention. The move to open an information office may help Tonga considerably in this. Within Tonga itself there has recently been dramatic growth in media activity. Five years ago, Tonga had only the government-owned weekly *Tonga Chronicle* and Radio A3Z AM. Now, A3Z has an FM English radio station and the privately owned *Kele'a* is published approximately quarterly in both English and Tongan, as are the new privately owned weekly *Times of Tonga* and the quarterly *Matangi Tonga*, published by the privately owned Vava'u Press. The monthly Catholic church newspaper has small English segments, notably the editorial. All this expansion has occurred despite the obvious difficulty of distributing newsprint throughout Tonga's forty or so inhabited islands. As a result, the population is now better informed and, as the election results suggested, more concerned about matters of government. Most likely radio rather than the printed media has helped form rural public opinion. As a consequence, on 6 June 1990, Nobles' Representative

Fusitu'a proposed in Parliament that radio broadcasts on parliamentary proceedings be stopped on the grounds that reports showed favoritism. The proposal was not accepted.

Changing Views on Parliamentary Representation

Based on the information publicized during the last Parliament, many Tongans now feel that representation in the Parliament is unbalanced. This view ignores both the divided attitudes among nobles and the fact that ministers are often overseas, both of which are factors that weaken the government's capacity to secure a majority. Nonetheless, the issue of numbers has become a serious consideration in recent years. As the parliamentary temperature has risen, it has become clear that on significant challenges, such as the impeachment of the finance minister and parliamentary accountability, nobles side with government. If the Parliament worked in what some members claim is a proper Polynesian way, toward accommodation and compromise even on the most serious and divisive issues, numbers would not be a serious issue. Indeed, when representation became an issue in 1989, it was out of frustration among the people's representatives that traditional procedures were failing. It remains to be seen whether the new parliamentary situation, with an even more radical commoner group that is better educated than any before it, will press the issue of representation. This issue will become a problem if ministers and nobles ignore grievances and fail to respond to the need for compromise. Interestingly, the editorial in the June–July 1990 issue of *Matangi Tonga* made an even more outspoken claim for increased political power for the people's representatives.

Attitudes to Parliamentary Accountability

Tonga will have to find its own way out of the parliamentary impasse that has developed. The Tonga Constitution is a very flexible document, and in the past Tonga's governments have been adept at evolving to keep up with or ahead of the changing world. Tonga's governments have shown themselves capable of managing change, as in the adoption of the 1875 Constitution and current reform of the Appeal Court structure (MT, June–July 1990). The real question is whether the government will do so sufficiently quickly to deal with what the election revealed as quite widespread discontent over accountability. Unfortunately, the range of possible responses by the government is limited because the parliamentary prob-

lems center on a few complex personalities who believe firmly that their responsibilities lie with the monarch, not with the Parliament. In a constitutional sense they are correct, and this lies at the heart of the problem. It is not yet clear whether the people's representatives in Tonga see accountability as a constitutional issue: over the last two years it has been debated in terms of personalities. The government will have to be imaginative in using the flexibility it has under the Constitution if a constitutional crisis is not to emerge from the current plays about personalities and responsibilities. It may take some years for this to crystallize as a crucial point in the minds of those most closely involved.

Moves to Party Organization

Political organization among Tongans has been weak and lacking in leadership. The government has not favored party or trade union development on the grounds partly that it is unnecessary in a small community and partly that traditional society handles social grievances in its own way. However, the 1990 election saw several politicians turn to mutual cooperation in order to win voters. Clearly, in 1990, coordination was required to canvas issues and to enhance impressions of unity when the popularity of proposed policies was unknown. Shortly after the election, the people's representatives announced that they would open an office in Nuku'alofa. There are signs that the older village, family, and rank structures are proving inadequate to provide a forum for discussion of new trends in Tongan society. It remains to be seen whether these changes will stimulate activity in the staff associations that both teachers and nurses have begun to develop over the last few years.

Implications for Tongan Society

The election result demonstrated widespread social change in Tonga. The people, with knowledge of what appeared to be abuse of position, forsook traditional loyalties and behavior patterns of the kind described by Marcus (1977). Other recent events were also relevant to this change of attitude. On three occasions since 1986, the government or members of Cabinet have been taken to court and found wanting. In 1987, Pohiva won a case over his wrongful dismissal from the public service and was awarded damages. Also in 1987, claims were awarded against the Police Ministry over extensive damage to a fishing boat that was improperly moored after being impounded. And in 1988, a member of Cabinet, the governor of

Ha'apai, was ordered to amend certain land deals he had made without proper authority. Before the election result was known, it was unclear whether such matters as these were of any concern to the Tongan in the street. Now the government knows they are. Tongans are better informed and willing to break with tradition in their judgments. Old strings of reciprocal obligation are breaking or stretching (as noted in Needs 1988), and little is available to replace them. Current political activity, however, is responding to a perceived need for practical reform rather than to change for its own sake.

The Influence of Regional Events

Tonga has cultural affinities and strong family links with the Polynesian parts of Fiji, as well as with both American and Western Samoa. More tenuous cultural relationships stretch to French Polynesia and Hawai'i. Links are weaker with the rest of the Pacific. Although much is made of the Fijian family link, it is strong only at the highest levels. Despite these cultural and personal associations, for most Tongans their strongest family links now are to New Zealand, the United States, and Australia, in that order, sustained in a very practical sense by regular remittances and the hope of emigration. Many Tongans travel overseas regularly and this has influenced their attitude to their parliamentary system. In addition, parliamentarians themselves travel extensively to attend meetings of both the Commonwealth and the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Association. In these meetings they have been exposed to the worldwide trend toward increased parliamentary accountability.

In the Pacific arena, Tongans have been exposed to the Fiji coups and the political strains in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. Of these, the nearest and most significant were the Fiji coups. It is unlikely that the rumors of a Tonga coup in 1990 could have begun without the precedents set in nearby Fiji. Many Tongans were appalled by Sitiveni Rabuka's challenge both to Parliament and to traditional chiefly authority, a view enhanced by an emotional awareness of Ratu Mara's Lau home region as the most Tongan or Polynesian part of Fiji. But although most Tongans would have been aware of the changing political environment around Tonga, there is no reason to suppose that the parliamentary troubles and the election swing would have occurred but for the specific events that happened in Tonga after 1986. The region has provided a dynamic and necessary background but not a sufficient condition for the election result.

The sufficient condition was increased domestic awareness leading to a changed attitude toward ministerial accountability.

THE SIGNAL TO THE GOVERNMENT

The 1990 election has put the government in general, and some ministers in particular, on notice. Tonga was never on the verge of revolution in 1989, but any cavalier dismissal of real grievances may bring that situation closer. The election results indicated that part of the electorate was disenchanted. During the last two years, Tonga has seen public criticism of its government and royalty, particularly by 'Akilisi Pohiva, growing in a manner unthinkable three years earlier. But there remains a deep-seated loyalty to both the Constitution and the present King, such that a foreigner may misjudge the extent of popular support for public criticism. The election result showed that in a secret vote, disillusion will be expressed. A foreigner is hard put to know whether the electorate wants the government to take action to control abuses or is looking for more fundamental change in the structure of government. The government could react constructively in many different ways, some of which could be unexpected. Ministers could be disciplined or even dismissed; parliamentary seats could be balanced in different ways; political parties could be allowed to develop; ministers could be chosen more frequently from among people's representatives; the government could seize an initiative in public information. All or any of these actions would ameliorate the tensions in the present parliamentary conflict, and allow a Polynesian compromise to evolve without serious threat to the Constitution.

To allow this to happen, it is very important that the government gives the election result due credibility. It would be irresponsible to ignore the frustration among latent opposition leaders. Perhaps even worse would be a move to repression, which, significantly, has been absent from recent Tongan political life. Tonga's national interest would not be served if a negative reaction to freedom of expression were to develop at a time when those freedoms that Tonga has guarded so closely are earning new respect in its evolving society.

Notes

- 1 The author was Australian High Commissioner to Tonga for three years to January 1990. The factual material in this paper is from public sources.
- 2 The Tongan pa'anga is at par with the Australian dollar.

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