

TUVALU

Since this is the first review of Tuvalu to be published in *The Contemporary Pacific*, some basic information is provided before the events of 1996–97 are discussed.

Independent from Britain in 1978 after nearly eight decades of colonial rule, Tuvalu, formerly the Ellice Islands and ruled jointly as part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, consists of eight main small islands. The total land area of 26 square kilometers is spread over 900,000 square kilometers of the central Pacific. The highest point in the country is no more than four meters above sea level, and most areas are lower. The adverse consequences of global warming, sea-level rise, and the threat of natural hazards are matters of considerable concern. Of the total population of 10,114, about 2,000 live or work overseas and over a third are on the capital island of Funafuti, making it one of the most densely populated atolls in the Pacific. The skewed population distribution, exacerbated by a high rate of natural increase, puts considerable pressure on economic and social services.

Britain's Queen Elizabeth is Tuvalu's head of state, locally represented by a Tuvaluan governor-general whose functions are mainly ceremonial. Parliament consists of a single chamber of twelve members elected by universal suffrage. Of the eight main islands, four return two candidates each and the rest one each. Niulakita, the ninth island, is not considered a separate electoral district. The legislature is presided over by a Speaker elected by

members. Elections are held every four years. Cabinet consists of the prime minister and four other ministers, and cabinet meetings are attended by two ex-officio members: the secretary to the government and the attorney-general. The prime minister is elected by Parliament from among its members, and in turn he appoints the ministers. There are no political parties in the western sense, but those not with the government form an unofficial opposition. The current constitution, adopted in 1986, replaced the independence constitution of 1978. Tuvalu is not a member of the United Nations, but it is a member of a number of UN specialized agencies and the Asian Development Bank, and is a signatory to many UN treaties and conventions. It has special status within the Commonwealth and is a full member of many of the Pacific regional organizations.

Because it is small, remote from markets, and lacking exploitable natural resources, Tuvalu's economy suffers from many constraints. These include limited skilled human resources; severe problems in administration, transportation, and communications; and inadequate social and economic infrastructure. Tuvalu depends highly on development aid assistance for most of its capital formation and technical assistance. Traditional donors include Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Asian Development Bank, UN specialized agencies, the European Union, and regional organizations. The Tuvalu Trust Fund—the first to be established in a developing country predominantly through donations from other countries—was set up

in 1987 to provide a source of revenue to the government in order to improve and strengthen its finances, improve social services, and help develop the economy. With initial contributions totalling A\$27.1 million, it has grown to A\$45 million in the first ten years. Lavish government and community celebrations, together with a five-day public holiday commemorating the fund's tenth anniversary in June 1997, must have made a sizeable dent in the fund's revenues.

In the year under review, Tuvalu underwent a most stressful period politically as it grappled with issues of governance involving traditional values and foreign political systems. The coalition government led by Prime Minister Kamuta Latasi had initiated a process to implement major constitutional changes. These included changing the national flag, preparing the country for a republican type of government, introducing legislative reforms to effectively support national development programs, and making amendments to the electoral law. The impetus of public sector and local government reforms was being successfully maintained through the personal interest of Latasi as minister responsible for these two areas.

In July 1996, Latasi and his official entourage paid a visit to Niutao Island—the home of former Governor-General Tomu Sione, who was dismissed in 1994 after being “unwisely” appointed by former Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu. The people of Niutao had been bitter about the dismissal, and the purpose of the historic meeting was to try and reconcile any differences by applying traditional

ways of consultation, dialogue, and consensus. The matter was amicably settled, and relationships between the government and the Niutao people were normalized.

The agreement allowing Asia Pacific Telecommunications to rent many of Tuvalu's international telephone numbers came under heavy criticism from the opposition in 1996. The main reason was that some of these numbers were being used outside Tuvalu for “phone sex,” a practice that critics say is unchristian. However, the agreement earns much-needed foreign exchange for the country.

As the country geared up for the eighteenth independence anniversary on 1 October 1996, the government and the opposition found themselves in the middle of an unprecedented political crisis. The opposition demanded the resignation or dismissal of Prime Minister Latasi and his ministers. The crisis had started several months before the independence celebrations. Deputy Prime Minister Otinielu Tausi had been at loggerheads with Minister of Finance Koloa Talake for some time. The latter had a litany of queries probing the former's failure to submit his tax returns over a number of years, excessive claims for travel allowances, disputed payments for parliamentary privileges, and purchase of departmental stores from the deputy prime minister's private shop contrary to government purchasing procedures. Tausi had failed to submit satisfactory responses to the Ministry of Finance and was demanding that the minister of finance should either be moved away from the ministry or be dismissed. Tausi stopped attending

caucus meetings. Unable to bring him back to the fold, and under mounting pressure from other colleagues, Latasi dismissed Tausi from public office on 16 September 1996. As this was the first time that a cabinet minister was dismissed in such a manner, Tuvaluans witnessed the exercise of such political powers with a mixture of astonishment and trepidation.

Tausi accused other ministers of similarly abusing parliamentary privileges. He had also been very discontented with efforts by Latasi to persuade the opposition leader, Bikenibeu Paeniu, to join their group without discussing the matter first with all members of the coalition. Although strongly denied by Latasi, there may well be some truth in the assertion, as Paeniu was not only often seen during this period with the prime minister, but his performance in Parliament against the government had suddenly become less effective. Tausi joined the opposition, accompanied by Tomasi Puapua, the Speaker of Parliament and former prime minister. This left the government in the minority. With the change in fortune and the possibility of leading the new government, Bikenibeu Paeniu disassociated himself from Latasi and launched a vicious campaign against the government. The opposition canvassed strongly for the immediate resignation of Latasi and solicited the interventions of the overseas media, the governor-general, island communities, island chiefs, and elders, as well as the civil service. The opposition petitioned the governor-general on 27 September 1996, but the governor-general advised that he was not empowered to address such a

political situation. The constitution provides that the prime minister may be removed from office due to a lack of majority supporting him only by way of a motion of no-confidence moved in a session in Parliament. But a session of Parliament may only be called on the advice of the prime minister.

Latasi was not to be intimidated into resigning and indicated that the opposition should await the session of Parliament, set for December, at which time it could move a motion of no confidence. He advised that it was constitutionally legal for him to remain in his post until the December session of Parliament. This angered the opposition, who claimed that Latasi was hungry for power and argued that since they had the majority, it was incumbent on him to resign immediately. Alternatively, the opposition members argued, a session of Parliament should be called at once—and not delayed to December—so that Latasi's minority government could be voted out of power. The opposition increased its attacks on the government and declared a war of scathing personal remarks against Latasi, including putting considerable pressure on island communities to rise against the government.

In an unprecedented move, the opposition intervened in the public service and advised the public service commission and the budget committee (which was then preparing the 1997 budget) to cease all functions until the opposition had installed a new government.

In responding to opposition calls for support, the four most populous

islands (Nanumea, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, and Funafuti) said that the political crisis would be resolved in accordance with the constitution when Parliament met in December 1997.

Defeated in the historic motion of no confidence on 18 December 1996, the Latasi regime was succeeded by the government of Bikenibeu Paeniu, formerly prime minister from 1989 to 1993. Although it had only to rule for the remaining year before the general elections, Paeniu's new government started off with a long and ambitious list of the things it wanted accomplished. Paeniu's desire to do many things all at once is exemplified by his "Vision 2015" policy statement, delivered to Parliament in April 1997. Critics argued that the document lacked focus and, contrary to its title, failed to provide any vision.

Paeniu's government immediately withdrew the new flag and returned the country's old flag. It halted all efforts to prepare the people for a republican political system, leaving the constitutional lawyer recruited specifically to assist with constitutional changes grossly underemployed. It sacked the chairman of the Public Service Commission for standing up for the constitutional rights of the commission at the time when the then opposition demanded that the commissioners to cease all their functions until a new government was formed. A couple of investigatory inquiries were conducted into public servants suspected of having been involved in a political way during the period of the political crisis. The question remains, however, whether the government would penalize a civil servant who

may have acted in a political way that was advantageous to a member of its team, or whether they are looking only for those who may have acted against their political interests.

As prime minister, Paeniu was better placed to ingratiate himself with the Niutao community over his "unwise" appointment of Tomu Sione as governor-general in 1993. Special efforts were made to find employment for him. Paeniu appointed him as a local government consultant after New Zealand rejected Tuvalu's attempts to employ him as the Tuvalu liaison officer based in Auckland. Although a similar exercise had been carried out in 1995, the government conducted a People's Congress on the island of Niutao in late June 1997, with about a hundred delegates from the government and various island communities to look at reforms in local government. The second member of Parliament from Niutao Island, Baueri Irata, in addition to his parliamentary duties, was appointed on a full-time basis to replace the chairman of the public sector review committee, thus cementing further Paeniu's relations with the Niutao community.

The political landscape during the year under review was dominated by increasing "obsessive personalism" in the various policies and actions of the political leaders. Domestic politics has increasingly become more and more complex, raising grave doubts about whether the "peaceful paradise" appellation is any longer appropriate for the country.

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