

reforms, that the changes are likely to be establishment-guided and will have to be establishment-approved.

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WESTERN SAMOA

Western Samoa experienced a tumultuous year that saw the birth of a new political party and the merger of two others, legal challenges by the government's former controller and chief auditor and an anti-tax group, and an emergency hospital visit by the nation's top politician. Dengue fever and destructive African snails put in sudden and unwelcome appearances. Women's issues, particularly spousal abuse, were also debated, and the independent media took aim at the government for ignoring poverty and the explosion of child labor in Apia. The media also found themselves criticized by the government for being too critical of government activities. All of this was capped off by a highly contentious national election that saw the governing party returned for a further five years.

The Value Added Goods and Services Tax, which adds 10 percent to all

purchases (inaugurated at the beginning of 1995), topped the list of controversial measures introduced by the government. Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana and his party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), maintain that the public sector requires a source of revenue in order to provide services and undertake public projects. Opponents, including Opposition Leader Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese of the Samoa National Development Party (SNDP), and Matatumua Maimoaga, the founder of the newest political party, the Samoa All People's Party (SAPP), angrily denounced the measure saying it imposes too onerous a burden on the poorest Samoans. While denying they are a political party, Tumua and Pule, an opposition group, took to the streets to demonstrate against the value-added tax in early 1994. They subsequently attempted to deliver a petition allegedly signed by 133,000 citizens to the head of state but were rebuffed by the government. A fourteen-member government-appointed commission of inquiry later dismissed the petition as a fabrication, because they could only verify eleven of the signatures. Two of Tumua and Pule's leaders, Faamatuani Tala Mailei and Toleapaialii Toesulusulu, had sedition charges brought against them by the government, but these were dismissed in June 1995. They planned to counter-sue the government, claiming obstruction of their constitutional rights to free speech and freedom of assembly. Court action on their suit is still pending at the time of writing.

The Samoan business community, which pledged to support implementation of the value-added tax, has also

grown more critical of the government. In September 1995, spokesmen for the Manufacturers Association and the Chamber of Commerce said that they had an understanding with the government that, in exchange for their support on the tax, the government would review current income tax and tariff charges. Local businessmen expected there would be a reduction in the duty on raw materials, a more rational, less complicated system of duty calculation, and a lowering of income taxes. Following the government review, however, the only indication of progress in this direction is a stated commitment to tax reform in the minister of finance's 1995-96 budget.

In February, the government announced a reduction in duties on several imported items. The opposition characterized the move as a means of soliciting votes in the upcoming elections. This was vehemently denied by Deputy Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, who said the reductions were part of a long-term government program. The government refused to lower tariffs on newsprint despite opposition demands, in an apparent slap at a private newspaper, *The Samoa Observer*, which had been continually critical of the government.

Apia was the venue for the Eighth South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme meeting held in early October 1995. French representatives found themselves the object of angry protests against the resumption of nuclear testing in French Polynesia earlier in the year. Many of the protesters questioned the sincerity of French claims that they were concerned about the environment when they were

simultaneously testing nuclear weapons in the region. Many also found it odd that France should be invited when they had been virtually ignored at the South Pacific Forum dialogue meeting just a month before. Western Samoa joined with six other South Pacific nations at the meeting to issue a strongly worded protest that asked for an immediate end to the test series until a comprehensive environmental assessment could be carried out at the two test sites, Moruroa and Fangataufa. France's permanent secretary for the South Pacific, Jean Bressot, who was at the meeting, indicated the series would end in a few months and the test sites would be closed down. After conducting a total of six tests in the latter half of 1995, French President Jacques Chirac finally announced an end to the test series in late January 1996.

The government of Western Samoa found itself the object of regional ridicule in December 1995 when the news-magazine *Islands Business* named suspended Controller and Chief Auditor Su'a Rimoni Ah Chong its Pacific Man of the Year. Su'a was suspended by the government in June 1995 for issuing a report detailing widespread misuse of public office and money among Samoan politicians. He was suspended from office before the report was made public and action could be taken against those abusing the public trust. Although he has popular support, it is reportedly muted because of a "year of repercussions, both business and personal."

Su'a's fortunes did not improve in January 1996 when the Supreme Court cleared the prime minister, his govern-

ment, and the legislative assembly of a lawsuit charging wrongful conduct brought by Su'a. In early March, a motion to suspend him from his position a second time (the first suspension had lapsed) was enacted by the HRPP-dominated parliament by a vote of 34 to 10. The prime minister told parliament he would resign if his motion failed. At the same time, he accused Su'a of misappropriating government funds to mount his legal case against the government. Su'a has responded with a series of lawsuits, the latest of which was lodged against the prime minister for the personal attack he made in parliament.

Su'a did receive some measure of support later when the Western Samoa Society for Civil Liberties claimed in a widely circulated letter that Deputy Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi should get the full blame for preventing government accounts from 1990-1993 from being audited by the controller and chief auditor. According to the society, this clearly contravened the provisions of the 1964 Public Money Act. The letter argued that the rights of citizens and taxpayers had been "seriously abridged or undermined" because of government refusal to audit public accounts. The deputy prime minister was reelected in the April 1996 elections and retained his ministerial posts.

One recurring debate in Samoa is whether poverty exists or not. HRPP members claimed in parliament that it did not exist in the country if one "compared [local] conditions to places like Bombay or Calcutta or Samoa of the 1920s." SNDP members were quick to point out that neither city nor a

Samoa of sixty years ago provided an accurate yardstick to measure poverty by. They suggested that HRPP members were ignorant of the poverty surrounding them and had done little to alleviate the conditions of the poor. An independent survey by a New Zealand firm, Social Policy 2000, subsequently confirmed poverty existed in the country. The study focused special attention on the plight of children aged ten to twelve selling products in Apia when they should be in school. At the same time the *Samoa Observer*, a local independent paper, ran a series of pictures documenting child labor and denouncing the government for its inaction. While the Social Policy 2000 group did receive criticism for its supposedly unscientific collection of data and its conclusions, no effort has been made to date to rectify the problem of child labor and ensure that all children have access to a proper education.

Women's issues commanded attention several times during the year, most notably as a result of the actions of politicians. Minister of Women's Affairs Polataivao Fosi reportedly swore at a female supervisor of the Western Samoa Shipping Corporation, when there was no room for his vehicle on the ferry to Savai'i. Then Member Tofilau Tauvagaa raised eyebrows in February 1996 when he complained in parliament that too many Samoan women "were spending their time yap-yapping at women's committees and coming home late instead of caring for their families." Finally, a women's group, *Mapusaga o Aiga*, met formally to discuss the issue of spousal abuse at a week-long conference in February 1996. They discussed a report contain-

ing several shocking personal accounts of rape and severe beatings suffered by various Samoan wives.

Several controversial government sell-offs occurred during the year. In October, the government sold its 25 percent interest in the Bank of Western Samoa to the Australia and New Zealand Banking group, which now has 100 percent ownership of the bank. A government spokesperson explained that it was “part of the government’s continuing Programme to privatize its shareholding,” but several financial observers were surprised by the sudden government divestiture of a profitable company. They speculated that the sell-off was necessary to “plug a budget blow-out” that includes paying off the government-owned Polynesian Airlines debt estimated to be in the range of ws\$70–90 million. Similar plans were afoot for the divestiture of the government shares of Western Samoa Breweries, another profitable company, in December. The government has also drawn on the country’s foreign reserves, cut into public expenditure, and borrowed from the National Provident Fund to finance the airline debt.

Medical issues were of major concern to Samoan politicians and citizens during 1995–96. In the fall of 1995, Samoa experienced an outbreak of dengue fever, which resulted in some deaths. Many others fell ill, and health facilities were overrun. Complicating the situation was the initial inability of the Health Department to positively identify the illness and an effective means of treating it. Tests run in New Zealand finally confirmed in late December 1995 that the illness was

a new strain of dengue fever, but this was not announced until well after the illness had run its course.

AIDS continued to worry many Samoans. A study conducted in early 1996 showed that many young Samoan adults remain ignorant of the causes and treatment of AIDS. According to the April 1996 edition of the journal, *Talamua*, one case of death resulting from AIDS-related diseases was reported in June 1995, and a second individual, a woman, is reportedly close to death. Health officials indicated that they were awaiting the results of blood tests for a Samoan rugby player believed to have had relations with the dying woman. The government is looking at various options that would give the Health Department the legal power to test those suspected of carrying the AIDS virus.

Relations with other countries remained unchanged, save Samoa’s relations with France. Given the end of the nuclear testing in the South Pacific at the start of 1996, however, rapid improvement in the relationship seems likely. In other news, Japan has begun another large aid project in Samoa, the construction of the new National University of Samoa. The People’s Republic of China will soon complete its construction project, the Women and Youth’s Economic Activity Centre, which will serve as a major venue for the celebration of the upcoming Seventh Pacific Festival of Arts to be held in September.

The taro blight, which began effectively destroying Samoa’s leading export crop in mid-1993, continues unabated into its third year. In May 1996, former Minister of Agriculture

Misa Telefoni claimed that the blight might have been the result of economic sabotage. Telefoni said the blight had not only diminished Samoa's export earnings, but also resulted in a marked increase in rice imports, further aggravating Samoa's already serious negative balance of trade. Local businessmen were skeptical of Telefoni's claims, citing the lack of supervision at ports of entry as the most likely culprit. Producing taro in Samoa is still feasible, but the recommended chemical treatment is expensive and the labor is both intensive and time-consuming. Thus, a rebound for Samoa in this particular export crop does not seem likely in the near future.

Samoa is facing a potentially more destructive agricultural problem this year. African snails, introduced in 1991, have suddenly exploded in numbers, and efforts by the Agriculture Department have failed to stem the infestation. The same snail has plagued American Samoa since the 1940s. In January, the government revealed a plan to pay citizens for collecting and destroying the snails.

Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana had a rocky political year. In October, he was embroiled in a land dispute pitting the government against its citizens. Vaiusu village claimed three hundred acres of land at Tuana'imoto, which they said had been taken by force from them during the German colonial occupation of Samoa. However, the land, which has been administered by the Western Samoa Trust Estate Corporation since 1962 when Samoa became an independent state, is considered government property. Villagers have sought the land's return

since 1991, and recently began dividing up and illegally settling on the land in question. The prime minister ducked the issue by stating that he would need to meet with the government's Land Board before making a final decision. At the time of writing, no decision had been announced.

In November 1995, the prime minister lashed out against Samoa's media while on a visit to New Zealand, claiming that all were politically motivated. The charge was ironic given that the government controls most of the Samoan media, the only exceptions being the *Samoa Observer* and Magik FM 98, a local radio station. In the same interview, Alesana also stated the need for stricter government control of the media. In February, he again blasted the media, but was more selective about his targets. This time he blamed the *Samoa Observer* and Magik FM 98 for "being lackeys of the opposition."

In March 1996, Prime Minister Alesana was admitted to the intensive care unit of Green Lane Hospital in Auckland, where he has been a regular patient since undergoing a heart bypass operation some years ago. His two-week hospital stay, just prior to the election, raised once again the issue of whether his health was adequate for another five-year term of office. The issue became moot, however, when he returned to campaign for reelection.

The campaign effort was capped by a marathon five-hour televised speech in mid-April 1996 extolling HRPP achievements, and announcing the party's manifesto and promises for the coming five-year term. Later the same month, the prime minister claimed in

parliament that the opposition had plotted to assassinate him during a Tumua and Pule political rally a couple of years earlier. The assassination conspiracy claims, which supposedly involved members of the SNDP and the recently suspended government controller and chief auditor, were met with laughter from the opposition.

A lot of maneuvering by opposition parties and political candidates preceded the election. The Human Rights Protection Party lost one of its own when Matatumua Maimoaga resigned her seat in early March 1996 in order to lead a new party, the Samoa All People's Party. Matatumua has been known to vote against her own party on what she considered matters of principle. She was, for example, the only HRPP member to vote against the suspension of the controller and chief auditor. Matatumua cited government corruption and the poor quality of education in the country as the motivating factors in her decision to create a new party, which she promised would be people oriented. The party platform did not call for the abolition of the value-added tax, although taxes on basic necessities would be immediately removed. Matatumua Maimoaga was not reelected in the April elections.

At roughly same time, another opposition party, the Samoa Liberal Party, announced that it would merge with the Samoa National Development Party. Aiono Nonumalo Leulumoega Sofara, founder and leader of the Samoa Labour Party since 1993, explained that the two parties had taken similar positions on issues and

that "it was only natural that the two parties would come together." He was not reelected in April.

Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the Samoa National Development Party, stated that it would set up an anti-corruption panel if it were elected. The tribunal would investigate corrupt government practices, process complaints of unethical practices by politicians and government employees, and develop a code of conduct and ethics for government departments and heads. The party also called for abolishing the value-added tax and instituting a transparent and accountable financial management system in government, and committed itself to a free press.

The national elections were held on 26 April, and preliminary results indicated that the ruling Human Rights Protection Party had lost its absolute majority of 34 seats. The opposition parties, Samoa National Development Party, Samoa Liberal Party, and Samoa All Peoples Party, did not capitalize on this turn of events, however, as voters turned out in large numbers to elect independent candidates. Initial results showed the Human Rights Protection Party with 23 seats; the rival SNDP-SLP with 12 seats; the SAPP with 0 and independents totaling 13. Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana boldly claimed victory that same evening, insisting several independents had joined the Human Rights Protection Party. Political observers believed that even if that were the case, the party's hold on power would be tenuous because of its dependence on the support of independents in parliament.

The election results did not become

fully clear until recounts and legal proceedings were carried out in the two weeks afterward. Official results were finally announced on 15 May with the HRPP receiving 24 seats, SNDP receiving 11, SLP 1, and independents 13. The HRPP was then able to convince enough independents to join its ranks to regain a majority (34 seats) and form a government. Prime Minister-

elect Tofilau Eti Alesana and his newly realigned cabinet were then sworn into office on 19 May by His Highness the Head of State Malietoa Tanumafili II. In a speech prior to being sworn in, Tofilau promised that his government would work to improve the nation's education system, health system, and roads.

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