

Minister murdered in Western Samoa

A correspondent
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A 34-year-old man from the Western Samoan capital of Apia was arrested last week for the assassination of Public Works Minister Luagalau Levaula Kamu on July 16. The killing, the first of its kind, has shocked the small Pacific Islands country. Kamu was slain with a single shot in the back, fired from close range.

The shooting occurred outside a political function to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the ruling Human Rights Protection Party. Kamu, who was master of ceremonies, had briefly left the function to take a cellphone call. According to the police, the gun used was either a semi-automatic or an automatic rifle, which are illegal in Samoa.

The man, Eletise Leafa Vitale, appeared briefly in court this week, where he entered no plea. A Samoan from the village of Malie on the outskirts of Apia, he has a wife and three young children, and is employed running a plantation and cattle farm. He was identified by four youth who had chased him from the scene of the shooting, thinking he was a thief. They had been forced to abandon the chase when he threatened them with his rifle. Vitale is to be charged with murder, which carries the death penalty in Samoa.

While there is no evidence yet of any immediate motive for the killing, it is the first assassination of a political figure since Samoa gained independence from New Zealand in 1962. Reports carried in the Pacific media gave an indication of the local significance of the case. One read: "Radios were tuned to Radio 2AP to find some comfort or answers about the tragedy that has placed a dark cloud over this nation of ...170,000 who pride themselves on their culture and Christian beliefs".

Immediately following the killing, the Samoan government placed a temporary press ban on reporting details. As the police search got underway, three detectives and a forensic scientist were brought in from New Zealand to lead the inquiry. Whether or not any

particular political connection is established, the killing is a reflection of the growing political and social tensions now emerging in the tiny states that are scattered throughout the Pacific region.

The murdered cabinet minister was a prominent member of the Samoan political establishment. In his early 40s when he died, Kamu had trained as a lawyer in New Zealand at Victoria and Auckland Universities. He was a former chairman of the Samoan Advisory Council in New Zealand and had practised law in Samoa before entering parliament. His wife is also a lawyer and a Samoan MP.

The man accused of the murder is the son of the previous Minister of Works, who was sacked from that position last November by the new Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, following a scandal involving accusations of embezzlement of public funds. The accused man's father is still in parliament and the cabinet, but the scandal undermined his reputation and "family honour".

The Human Rights Protection Party has been in office since 1983 when it won the election following a major public service strike. Despite its conservative policies, it has retained a degree of public support as the party that extended the franchise to all adults over 20 years of age. Prior to 1983, official politics in Samoa had been dominated by shifting allegiances between the Matai (chiefs)—the only people who had the right to vote.

Over the past five years, the government has vigorously pursued an agenda of privatisation and market reform. In 1993-4, it implemented major taxation reforms, which were of benefit to businesses, while imposing a regressive 10 percent Value Added Tax on the population. A series of further financial liberalisation measures, such as tariff reductions, have followed. Earlier this year another round of personal income tax cuts was announced. Many of these moves have been carried through specifically in order to

impose the requirements of the World Trade Organisation for trade liberalisation.

As in many Pacific states, a key target of the restructuring programs has been the public service. Over the past three years a program of corporatising and privatising government enterprises has resulted in major job losses. The state-owned Post and Telecommunications Department has recently been corporatised—a step towards full privatisation. The Post Office Bank, once a section of Post and Telecommunications, was sold off two years ago.

The government has repeatedly claimed that the reforms have produced significant economic gains, with exports rising by 48 percent in 1997-98 and tourism earnings up 21 percent in the same year. Last year exports again rose by over 60 percent. However, only a thin layer of business and political leaders has benefited. For ordinary working Samoans, jobs have been lost, and wages suppressed. Economic growth for the past year was only 1.6 percent, while inflation has fallen from 6.8 to 2 percent on the back of declining real wages. Samoan families still rely heavily on money remitted from overseas relatives in order to live.

The government recently declared that the reform process is far from complete. It is currently examining to make the economy “more competitive” by “reducing the costs of doing business”. The next stage in this agenda is being driven by an Economic Action Plan put together by the South Pacific Forum, the organisation of South Pacific states, including Australia and New Zealand. The plan is based on the proposition that “private sector development is central to ensuring sustained economic growth”. According to this, the job of governments in the region is to “focus on providing a policy environment to encourage commercial activity”.

At a meeting of the South Pacific Forum Economic Ministers, held in Apia during early July, Samoa's Prime Minister announced that the Forum would lead the implementation of further economic reforms in the region. These would be designed to “boost private sector development,” accompanied by further public sector downsizing. Malielegaoi warned that these measures would inevitably generate “unwanted results...such as a high number of temporary job losses”.



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