

# Two parliamentarians charged over murder of Samoan minister

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A political crisis in the small Pacific Island nation of Samoa over the murder of Works Minister Luagalau Levaula Kamu deepened late last week. Two government MPs were arrested over their involvement in the assassination. The son of Leafa Vitale, one of the arrested parliamentarians, was sentenced to death on Saturday after pleading guilty to carrying out the murder.

The two MPs now in detention awaiting trial are Vitale, recently sacked as the Women's Affairs Minister, and former minister Toi Aukuso, who was Kamu's immediate predecessor in the Works portfolio. They have both been charged with murder and inciting to commit murder. Vitale's son, 34 year-old Elitise Leafa Vitale, was the first suspect arrested in the case, having been identified by witnesses leaving the scene of the shooting. His conviction and sentencing in the Supreme Court in the capital Apia came abruptly, only a week after his arrest.

Works Minister Kamu, 44, was killed on July 16 with a single rifle shot in the back while he was outside a social function marking the 20th anniversary of the ruling Human Rights Protection Party. He had been master of ceremonies at the event and had just introduced Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sailele before stepping off the stage to take a cellphone call.

A report in the *New Zealand Herald* claims that a contract killer had been hired to carry out the murder, but after twice going to Kamu's home had been unable to bring himself to go through with it. He is now believed to be the chief witness in the case against the two MPs.

Prime Minister Sailele moved quickly to distance the government from any connection with the affair. Within two days of the first arrest he issued a statement saying the death had not been "political". Then,

following the arrest of the two MPs, he expelled both men from the Human Rights Protection Party, at the same time sacking Leafa Vitale from his ministerial post.

According to reports now emerging from Samoa, the murder was linked to allegations of corruption and personal enrichment in governing circles. Late last year, Kamu replaced Vitale as Public Works Minister—part of a cabinet shakeup by the incoming Prime Minister, Sailele. Kamu, a New Zealand-trained lawyer, was publicly touted as the man who was going to clean up corruption in public works.

Just a fortnight before his assassination, Kamu was reported to have had angry exchanges with other cabinet ministers over accusations of corruption he had made in parliament. After that meeting he made a televised statement announcing the sacking of a number of officials in the Public Works Department.

The two MPs now implicated in his murder have been at the centre of corruption allegations in recent years. They were both accused, in a previous Audit Office report, of using public works machinery and staff for their private benefit. Toi Aukuso had come under criticism for raising cattle on land belonging to the government-owned Western Samoa Trust Estates Corporation, for winning work from the government Electric Power Corporation and for a conflict of interest in the purchase of a sawmill from the government.

New Zealand media investigations revealed that Leafa Vitale and his son have been linked to a series of official inquiries and police and insurance investigations, some going back almost a decade. Most of them had been covered up and never previously been made public. Vitale senior is alleged to have made death threats against two newspaper editors and two senior public servants. Only one of the cases went to

court and was dismissed.

According to a report in the *Sunday Star-Times*, an American insurance company is said to have investigated a fraud case in which Vitale faked his own death in the United States so that his wife could claim life insurance. The case was dropped when investigators visiting Apia discovered he was a Member of Parliament. There are also reports that the son, Eletise, had a warrant issued in Honolulu in 1995 for his arrest on a negligent homicide charge, stemming from a traffic accident. He also had an outstanding bench warrant in Hawaii on unspecified serious charges, as well as a number of lesser charges. He had managed to leave Hawaii before the warrants could be issued.

The recent appearance of corruption charges occurs within the context of government plans to press ahead with economic liberalisation and market reforms. Since coming to power in 1983, the governing Human Rights Protection Party has implemented the demands of international agencies such as the IMF and the World Trade Organisation for taxation changes, the removal of trade barriers and the downsizing of public services. In the current decade, state assets have been corporatised and privatised, including Post and Telecommunications—for which Aukuso was a former minister.

As elsewhere, the so-called cleaning up of corruption is connected to the government's attempts to attract foreign investors and “providing a policy environment to encourage commercial activity”. The murder of Kamu shows that these processes are generating sharp social and political frictions.



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