

Two Samoan ministers go to trial for assassinating a fellow cabinet member

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Two former ministers in the Samoan government went to trial on Tuesday in the Supreme Court in Apia on charges of murder. Leafa Vitale, 56, and Toi Aukuso, 67, are accused of instigating and planning the assassination of Public Works Minister Luagalau Leavaulu Kamu last July 16. Kamu was shot in the back while presiding at a social function marking the twentieth anniversary of the ruling Human Rights Protection Party.

Vitale's 34-year-old son, Eletise Vitale, pleaded guilty at his trial in August to firing the shot that killed Kamu and was sentenced to death by hanging. His sentence was recently commuted to life imprisonment. Vitale senior, who was Women's Affairs Minister, and Communications Minister Aukuso were arrested at the time but have pleaded not guilty. Aukuso faces additional charges of inciting unnamed people to murder both Kamu and Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sailele Malielegaoi. It is alleged that the pair also intended to kill the Chief Justice and the Lands Minister.

The murder, which alarmed the tiny island nation of 127,000 and sent shock waves throughout the Pacific states, was the first political assassination since the country gained independence from New Zealand in 1962. The trial, expected to be the biggest in Samoa's recent history, will be presided over by an Australian judge, Andrew Wilson. Special arrangements have been made to accommodate the large crowd of observers expected and Television Samoa has applied to record the proceedings.

The first stages of the trial began last week with the appointment of five elderly men as "assessors". Under the Samoan legal system, the assessors play the role of jurors but work closely with the presiding judge, who chairs all their meetings. The assessors were chosen in

the presence of the defence counsel, Attorney General Brenda Heather and the team of prosecutors.

A key prosecution witness, Eneliko Visesio, has reportedly been hiding in New Zealand, with the support of the Samoan government, pending his appearance at the trial. Visesio is said to be the hit man originally hired by the two politicians to carry out the killings. He is expected to give evidence regarding his negotiations with the accused and the arrangements they made. Eletise Vitale, who has been imprisoned under tight security on the island of Savai'i, is expected to be brought to Apia as a state witness.

The two ministers charged have been at the centre of corruption allegations in recent years. Toi Aukuso had been Kamu's predecessor as Minister of Public Works but had been replaced in 1998 as part of a cabinet shakeup by incoming Prime Minister Tuila'epa.

A previous Audit Office report had named both Vitale and Aukuso for their involvement in the use of public works machinery and staff for private benefit. It was alleged that Aukuso had raised his own cattle on land belonging to the government-owned Western Samoa Trust Estates Corporation, had been given a contract to carry out work for the government's Electric Power corporation and had a conflict of interest in the purchase of a government sawmill.

Vitale and his son have been the subjects of official and insurance investigations over the past decade, without the results being made public. Leafa Vitale is alleged to have made death threats against two newspaper editors and two senior public servants, but the only case that went to court was dismissed.

Before his assassination Kamu, a New Zealand-trained lawyer, had been touted as the man who was going to clean up the long-standing corruption in the government and public service. Just a fortnight before

being murdered, he had been involved in angry exchanges with other cabinet ministers over corruption allegations he had made in parliament. He had then made a televised statement in which he announced the sacking of a number of Public Works Department officials.

The corruption scandals are related to the drive to open up Samoa to foreign investment, trade and commercial activity. The old system of political ties, based on personal patronage and traditional village hierarchies, is considered an obstacle to economic liberalisation and market reforms. The ruling Human Rights Protection Party has been at the forefront of cutting business taxes, privatising public assets, removing trade barriers and slashing public services.

That the frictions in Samoa's small and close-knit ruling elite have resulted in assassination is symptomatic of the political tensions being created by the deepening social and economic problems to be found not only in Samoa but throughout the tiny Pacific island states.

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Samoa

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