

# Samoans mount protests over restrictive New Zealand immigration law

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Thousands of people in New Zealand and the Pacific Island state of Samoa staged simultaneous demonstrations last week to protest a law that denies the right of many Samoans to New Zealand citizenship. Protestors gathered in the New Zealand cities of Wellington and Christchurch as well as the Samoan capital of Apia on March 27 to demand the repeal of the 1982 Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act, which makes virtually all 170,000 Samoans ineligible to be New Zealand citizens.

In Wellington, some 2,000 protested peacefully at parliament, with speeches, dancing and singing. Six busloads of Samoan people travelled 12 hours from Auckland to join the Wellington demonstration. In Apia, a New Zealand High Commission official estimated 3,000 Samoans joined the protest. Demonstrators presented petitions containing 100,000 signatures, seeking the repeal of the Citizenship Act, which Samoans have long resented as racist.

The Act, stipulating that Samoans born before 1948 did not qualify for New Zealand citizenship, was passed in 1982. It was rushed through parliament by the conservative National government of Robert Muldoon, in order to nullify a Privy Council ruling that gave New Zealand citizenship to Samoans born between 1924 and 1948, and to their heirs. The ruling came after a landmark legal battle in which a Samoan woman living in the Wellington suburb of Lower Hutt challenged a deportation order.

One of the organisers of the Wellington march, Ester Laban, told Radio New Zealand: "This is the first time that the Samoan people are going to ask for something. They've all got their banners, and all the tattooed men will wear their traditional costumes, and they will also lead us with a Manu Samoa Haka. We are walking there to tell them that we are entitled to receive

citizenship."

Demonstrators highlighted the fact that Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark had once opposed the law. As a new opposition MP in 1982, she was one of half a dozen Labour MPs who broke ranks with the party to condemn the bill. Describing the Act as discriminatory, Clark said at the time: "14 million Australians could enter New Zealand without visas and reside here permanently. Why is the Government so worried about the remote possibility of 100,000 Samoans exercising their right to live here?" She demanded that parliament "consider the sorry circumstances that have surrounded this legislation and ask ourselves ... whether its contents might justify the label of institutional racism. If the cap fits, we should wear it, and resolve to try a fresh approach."

In the wake of last week's demonstrations, however, Clark abruptly declared she saw no reason to review the law and effectively repudiated her own 1982 criticism of the racist character of the legislation. Speaking through a spokesman, Clark said that, as a young backbencher, she had been concerned at the way the "matter had been handled". Now justifying the passage of the law, she said "there was a strong will of parliament at the time in favour of proceeding with the legislation."

The "strong will of parliament," to which Clark refers, was a conservative government infamous throughout the Pacific for its harassment and intimidation of immigrants from neighbouring islands. At Muldoon's instigation, police staged dawn raids on the homes of Pacific Islanders living in New Zealand and expelled so-called "overstayers". Labour's support for the 1982 legislation simply underlined its own racist traditions.

Ethnic Affairs Minister Chris Carter backed Clark,

nervously telling the media that repealing the law would set a “difficult” precedent for immigrants from other Pacific Island states. Protest co-organiser, former National MP Arthur Anae hinted that if the government did not repeal the law, a case might be taken to the UN, and Samoans denied citizenship would claim compensation. “What the Samoan people want is the freedom of movement between New Zealand and Samoa,” he said. As a National Party MP, Anae’s own caucus refused to allow him to draft a private member’s bill to repeal the law.

The demonstrations—and the government’s response—are an expression of a sharp economic and social crisis throughout the region. Tiny Pacific Island countries like Samoa are teetering on the brink of economic collapse. Faced with deepening poverty and deprivation, many people have emigrated to Australia and New Zealand seeking a job and a better life. The issue of citizenship is thus a critical one for thousands of Pacific Islanders resident in New Zealand, not only for their own economic security, but to assist family members back home.

The Labour Party has adapted to the anti-immigrant rhetoric of right-wing parties such as the New Zealand First Party, which conveniently makes immigrants the scapegoat for the unemployment and poverty created by successive governments in Wellington. Labour vies to outdo other parties over immigration policy, which it insists must revolve around attracting “business expertise” and “wealth”. Pacific Islanders, once welcomed to fill a need for unskilled labour, are no longer a priority.

Clark’s refusal to repeal the 1982 law underscores the hypocrisy of her “apology”, delivered last year at a state function in Samoa, for “errors” committed under New Zealand colonial rule. New Zealand took over Samoa from Germany in 1914 and ruled it until independence in 1962. Samoans still remember New Zealand for two particular tragedies that left an indelible mark on the country’s history. In 1918, Spanish influenza killed one in five Samoans—about 8,000 people, including many of the country’s leaders—after authorities lied about sick passengers on a ship trading out of Auckland and let them ashore. A decade later, New Zealand police gunned down unarmed independence protesters during an uprising, killing nine and wounding 50.

Clark came to office in 1999 by exploiting a wave of popular opposition to the “market reform” program of previous National Party governments. Since then her *modus operandi* has been to parade “centre-left” credentials while systematically carrying out the demands of big business. Her “apology” in Samoa was a case in point. It was designed to bolster New Zealand’s influence in the Pacific Islands while shoring up Labour’s waning support among Pacific Islanders living in New Zealand. Last week’s protests suggest that Pacific Islanders in New Zealand and the region are becoming disillusioned with the Labour government and its agenda.



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