

Tongan monarchy defies mass protests and tightens media controls

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29 October 2003

Tonga's parliament last week passed controversial changes to the country's constitution that will increase state control of the media and increase the power of the near-absolute monarch, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV. The amendments were moved, at the behest of the king, in the 30-seat Legislative Assembly after earlier efforts this year to ban the New Zealand-published *Taimi 'o Tonga* [Times of Tonga] newspaper failed. The Supreme Court had declared the bans unconstitutional.

After several weeks of debate, the assembly passed by 16 votes to 11 the changes to Clause 7 of the constitution, which previously guaranteed freedom of speech. The changes will enhance the dictatorial powers of the monarch, giving him unilateral powers over media activities and the right to express dissent. All 12 cabinet ministers, who hold life appointments from the king and are not elected, voted for the changes while all eight "commoner" MPs who were present voted against. In a highly unusual move, three representatives of the so-called "nobles" also voted against.

Ten days earlier, thousands of people had marched to protest the impending changes, although protest marches are rare in Tonga, which has a population of just 104,000. In the capital, Nuku'alofa, 8,000 marchers—the largest demonstration in the Pacific kingdom's history—took a petition to the assembly. Church leaders, teachers, doctors, mothers with babies were among those to take to the streets, carrying banners opposing the new laws. A Catholic bishop led the main march and presented the petition containing 7,600 signatures, about a third of which had been collected among the expatriate Tongan community in New Zealand.

In April, the government declared the *Taimi o Tonga* a prohibited import in response to a long-running

campaign over corruption centring on the royal family. The government was thrown into crisis after the Supreme Court ruled that ordinances to enforce the ban, which were made by the king in the Privy Council, were unlawful and unconstitutional. When the government went to the Appeal Court over one of the Supreme Court decisions, the appeal was also dismissed. The government subsequently defied the court to try to keep the newspaper out of the country, but was finally forced to back down. It then moved to change the constitution, giving it the legal power to enforce the ban and stifle further dissent.

The campaign against the constitutional change was led by the "commoner" MPs. In the legislature, 12 seats are reserved for cabinet ministers appointed by the king and led by his youngest son, Prime Minister 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata. Nine MPs are selected by the country's 33 "nobles", who acquire their life titles by descent, and only the remaining nine are elected by popular vote. Seven of the "commoner" MPs are members of the Human Rights and Democracy Movement (HRDM), to which the *Taimi o Tonga* is closely allied.

The paper's Auckland-based publisher, Kalafi Moala, said the march signalled the people's growing anger at the constitutional change and the gathering strength of the pro-democracy movement in Tonga. "People are feeling that their freedom is going to be infringed on, not just the media, but their freedom to speak. There was a lot of passion from people at the march." The march was an indication of a "rising tide of resistance to the monarchy". As a result of the vote, however, Moala said he expected his newspaper to be permanently banned, and that there would be no further legal recourse.

Demonstrating the schism opening up within Tongan

ruling circles, the *Matangi Tonga* newspaper editorialised that the changes were “madness”. “[They] will damage the reputation of this country beyond our wildest nightmares. [They go] against the principles of the civilised world.” The editorial went on to warn the government that it would not win respect by changing the laws simply because it had lost court cases against its critics.

When the bill was taken into parliament for its second reading three days after the demonstrations, the government simply dismissed the protests. Government spokesperson Eseta Fusitua said opponents did not “understand” the changes to Clause 7 and that parliament should note that a majority of citizens did not join the march. She said the protests mainly “represented Catholics” and that people had only marched because their church leaders or relatives had told them to.

The mass demonstration had, in fact, taken place in the face of a concerted campaign by high-level officials to prevent it. A team, including the Acting Deputy Prime Minister Clive Edwards and five other ministers, held a number of village meetings to try to shore up popular support for the law change. At the meetings, which were later televised, many people challenged the need for the change and support for the government was very low, even among the more conservative village leaders. In desperation, Edwards responded by accusing the HRDM politicians of “treason”.

The banning of the New Zealand-published newspaper and the moves to alter the constitution have deep-seated causes, lodged in the profound social and economic tensions now raging in the Pacific. A recent report posted on the University of Hawaii’s *Pacific Islands Report* website notes that Pacific nations have the world’s highest suicide rates.

In Tonga poverty is widespread, with ordinary households depending largely on money remitted from expatriate islanders living overseas. Tourism provides the only other significant source of hard currency. Unemployment is into double figures, with only about a quarter of the 2,000 young people who leave school each year able to find jobs.

In 2001, the government attempted to divert anger over deteriorating economic conditions by victimising Chinese shopkeepers. Hundreds were earmarked for deportation on expiry of their work permits on the

grounds that they were creating “ill-feeling” by “dominating” the economy. Meanwhile the royal family lives in ostentatious luxury, controlling lucrative business activities and requiring ordinary Tongans to pay tithes from their village plantations.

Against this background, the HRDM has emerged, receiving political support from the New Zealand government and the Commonwealth, to challenge the entrenched monarchy in order to “modernise” the economy and “governance” of the state. The HRDM’s program, however, has nothing to do with improving the lot of ordinary Tongans. It primarily represents the interests of a layer of local and expatriate business and professional entrepreneurs who seek to “reform” the monarchy along British lines and take over the levers of power, establishing commercial ventures and control of international foreign investment and trade.



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