Public servants' strike deepens Tonga's political crisis

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In the largest ever protest rally in the Pacific Island kingdom of Tonga, up to 10,000 public servants, their families and supporters marched through the capital Nuku'alofa to the royal palace on August 8. At the same time, an unprecedented general strike by 3,000 government workers entered a third week, demanding wage increases of up to 80 percent. The cabinet had earlier warned strikers that if they failed to return to work, they would be dealt with under the Public Service regulations, a thinly veiled threat that they would be sacked or punished.

King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV failed to end the strike last Friday with the promise of an "independent audit" of the public service salary scales. The civil servants declared they would continue the strike and over the weekend thousands defied a government order to vacate their rallying point at Pangai Si'I, a park in central Nuku'alofa. The country's primary and secondary school teachers had earlier been instructed to resume school for the third term on August 9. The teachers, supported by parents and students, responded to the order by keeping the schools closed and organising a second march on the day after the main demonstration.

Tensions escalated further this week. On Thursday, four government-owned vehicles were set alight and students threatened to burn government buildings if authorities did not move to settle the strike. Buildings in the centre of Nuku'alofa were scorched by the heat of the burning cars. The previous day students at Tonga College smashed cars belonging to strikebreakers brought into the school, and ransacked the school's computer rooms and offices, protesting the dismissal of the principal and senior staff.

While previously claiming that strikers had begun returning to work this week, government officials are now moving to bring in an arbitrator. Large crowds continue to gather every day in the capital in support of the strikers. Meanwhile, members of Auckland's Tongan community yesterday mounted a protest against the Tongan king who is in New Zealand to celebrate a family engagement. His visit is viewed as a sign of how little the royal family cares for the grievances of the Tongan people.

The strike began on July 22, triggered by the government's rejection of a request by the newly established Public Service Association (PSA) to reconsider huge disparities in salary increases in the budget. The upper echelons of the service were to get disproportionately large increases, while low-wage earners were to receive as little as one percent. Senior civil servants are currently paid $US20,000 a year, while other government workers receive as little as $1,300. Despite PSA attempts to defer strike action, a mass meeting demanded it commence immediately.

The strike began in the main government departments, effectively bringing the agencies to a halt. The government is Tonga's biggest employer. The offices of the Ministries of Lands, Labour, Fisheries, Marine and Ports, Works, the Civil Service Commission, the Treasury and the Post office were all closed. The government insisted there would be no change to the salary structure, prompting an estimated 2,000 public servants to march on parliament to present letters to the prime minister and speaker of the house.

The strike quickly spread. On July 23, the absence of staff to clear and discharge cargo forced one ship to bypass Tonga. The government then promised to address salary "anomalies" and urged workers to return to work. The strikers were adamant they receive greater pay increases. On July 26, public schools throughout the country were forced to close after more than 1,400 teachers walked out. A week later, doctors, nurses, dentists and support staff at the main Vaiola Hospital voted to strike as well.

By then the strikers' demands had crystallised into a universal call for across-the-board pay rises of "60, 70 and 80 percent" for all public sector workers, and community support began to grow. While the head of the Tonga Chamber of Commerce and Industries denounced an 80 percent rise as "suicidal", and not "realistic in terms of what the government can afford", the civil servants had begun receiving donations and support from many small businesses. Influential church leaders threw their weight behind the strike.

Over the course of two weeks, workers rejected a series of offers by the government—starting with a mediated settlement, then an across-the-board 12.5 percent rise, a set of increases between 10 and 20 percent and finally a 30 percent rise. In a sign of increasing tensions, the manager of a private television station said the power supply had been deliberately cut off ahead of a planned broadcast of a PSA statement. The manager said he had received threats from official circles to stop broadcasting "anti-government views" or his premises would be bulldozed.

At an extraordinary meeting held at the Atele Indoor Stadium on August 5, teachers rejected a $2 million offer from the Ministry of Education to settle their wage demands separately. According to reports, the minister and his director appeared "very pleased with themselves" when they presented the new salary structure, designed only for teachers, which provided increases ranging from 60 percent at the top of the scale to 125 percent at the bottom.

To clapping and cheers, the first speaker from the floor said the offer was too late, that "the glass of water has been spilled" and the only acceptable offer was the "60, 70, 80 percent" for all public servants. The teachers declared they would not be split from other striking public servants.

Two days earlier, over 100 Tonga College students had marched through central Nuku'alofa singing songs. The march, led by the head prefect, wound its way to Pangai Si'I where it was greeted by several thousand strikers. The prefect said that since the strike began the students had felt "homeless and neglected because they did not hear their teachers' voices any more", but they had come to give the teachers and other strikers their full support.

The strike takes place in the context of a deepening crisis of political rule in the small island state of some 110,000 people. In May, 4,000 demonstrators marched on the royal palace protesting rising electricity prices and the monopoly control of the country's power supply by the Shoreline Group, a company owned by Crown Prince Tupouto'a.

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Shoreline took over when the electricity system was privatised three years ago.

The march followed revelations by a former Shoreline employee that the prince was paying himself and two business partners annual salaries of about $US400,000 each. Dismissing the criticisms as "jealousy", the prince contemptuously declared: "Everybody in this country is in business. It just so happens that most of them grow taro [a staple food]. I am in power generation instead of growing taro".

The marchers demanded that electricity generation to be returned to the government, but numerous banners indicated broader political discontent, with some calling for democracy while others protested about "selfish leaders". Another march to parliament earlier in the year protested against the imposition of a new 15 percent consumption tax on all goods and services.

Public unrest intensified this year over the business activities and ostentatious wealth of the king's children—Tupouto'a and Princess Salote Pilolevu Tuita. Besides his personal control of the electricity network, the prince also owns the only brewery, a cell phone company and Tonga's Internet domain name. His sister controls Tonga's sovereign geo-stationary satellite slots through a Hong Kong registered company and leases them out to Chinese companies, garnering millions.

Popular resentment over social and economic inequities has resurfaced in the current strike. Statements have referred to the "injustice exercised by the distribution of the nation's wealth by His Majesty's cabinet". Others have criticised the millions of dollars given away to Shoreline and Royal Tongan Airlines, which collapsed last year with debts of $US12 million. According to the PSA, the total required to meet the salary claims for the "least privileged" is $20 million—but this is proving "too difficult for them to give".

The Tongan royal family, established in the nineteenth century under the tutelage of British Methodist missionaries, wields almost absolute power. The monarch, now 87 years old and the ruler since 1965, appoints both the prime minister and deputy prime minister for life, as well as the entire cabinet, the Privy Council and the Supreme Court. The constitution guarantees that the unelected elite controls the 30-seat parliament. Twelve seats are reserved for the appointed cabinet ministers and nine are selected by the country's 33 "nobles", who acquire their life titles by descent. Only nine MPs are elected by popular vote.

The principal critic has been the Human Rights and Democracy Movement (HRDM). According to its mouthpiece, the *Matangi Tonga* newspaper, the traditional leaders are "all tied up in their own business interests", making it difficult to "separate their business and national interests".

While appealing to popular discontent, the HRDM primarily represents a layer of local and expatriate business and professional entrepreneurs who are seeking to break up the monarchy's stranglehold on economic and political power. A prominent convert to their ranks is former Police Minister Clive Edwards, who is currently leading a court challenge to have power generation returned to the Tonga Electric Power Board.

In recent elections, the HRDM captured the majority of commoner seats in the parliament. Earlier this year, however, the "pro-democracy" faction split, resulting in the establishment of a new party, the Peoples Democratic Party. There were no issues of principle separating the two with each claiming to represent the pro-democracy movement.

Their manoeuvering was exposed immediately after the March elections when the king persuaded two of the "peoples' representatives" to resign and join the cabinet, effectively reducing the strength of the opposition from nine seats to seven. One of the king's recruits, long-standing democracy advocate Feleti Sevele, was promoted to acting prime minister to deal with the popular groundswell against the governing elite.

Efforts have been made to confine the public sector strike to narrow official channels. The PSA gave over the platform of the August 8 march to the king's nephew Prince Tu'ipelehake, who used the occasion to claim the title of "the People's Prince". The PSA worked with the prince to turn the march into a supplication to the king. Outside the royal palace, a petition was ceremonially handed to Princess Piloevu Tuita amid prayers and the singing of the national anthem. One media report described the prince as having "cemented a personal relationship with the strikers".

However, the issues raised by the strike—above all the deep divide between rich and poor—are explosive ones. Poverty is widespread in the country, with ordinary households depending heavily on money remitted from islanders living and working overseas.

Three years ago the government launched a $US10 million program of privatising public utilities, downsizing the public service, tax changes, encouraging free trade, introducing an "open skies" policy to boost international air flights and tourism, and seeking WTO membership. While the program has been criticised for failing to deliver services or boost the economy, the policies have widened the gap between the tiny privileged elite and ordinary Tongans.

An Asian Development Bank report, released in March, into hardship and poverty in Tonga found that 23 percent of the 16 communities surveyed across 6 of the main islands were living below the poverty line of $T28.18 ($US14.72) per week. It also noted the country's deteriorating economy, pointing to the rising cost of living, the falling value of the Tongan pa'anga (dollar) and the wastage of public funds.

The document described how poor families had to make daily choices between buying food and paying school fees. Other hardships included: widespread dependency on relatives for food, money and shelter; inability to meet basic family needs; supporting too many dependents in one household; and limited access to resources, particularly land, and inability to meet traditional obligations. The only reason more people were not in the category of "poverty" was that they were able to grow subsistence crops.

Tonga's neighbours are closely observing the strength and intensity of the strike—and broad support it has won. New Zealand parliament's foreign affairs select committee recently concluded a special inquiry into Tonga with a series of recommendations to provide an "impetus for change". The recommendations included targeting aid programs to "prevent corruption", promoting public sector reform, facilitating "democratic change"—targeting in particular the judiciary, legislature and public service—and increasing trade opportunities.

While the committee stopped short of recommending more direct intervention, Wellington's recent military deployments to other so-called "failed states", such as the Solomon Islands, have established a clear precedent for such actions to assert New Zealand's economic and strategic interests in the Pacific.

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