

# Former Tongan PM charged in passport inquiry

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Amid deepening political turmoil in the small Pacific island kingdom of Tonga, police announced on March 2 the arrest of former prime minister Lord Tu'ivakano in connection with a passport fraud scandal.

It is the most high-profile arrest by the Passport Taskforce, set up in 2015 to investigate the alleged scams. More than a dozen people, including several politicians, have so far pleaded guilty to various charges.

Tu'ivakano, prime minister from 2010 to 2014, and a sitting member of parliament appointed by the country's nobility, is charged with making a false statement for the purpose of obtaining a passport, perjury, acceptance of a bribe, and money laundering.

In a separate case, Internal Affairs Minister 'Akosita Lavulavu and her husband, former cabinet minister 'Etuete Lavulavu, were arrested on March 4. The charges include knowingly dealing in forged documents.

An audit of Tonga's immigration divisions, completed in 2013, found a Chinese couple, Sien Lee and his wife, had been issued seven diplomatic and 15 ordinary passports since 2003. Local media reported that King George Tupou VI told Tu'ivakano not to issue diplomatic passports to the couple. However, the Queen Mother ordered that they be given to her friends.

Documents provided to Fairfax Media in New Zealand last year also revealed Tu'ivakano had signed off on five passports in October 2014, despite concerns about the validity of the applicants. The Chinese nationals claimed they were granted citizenship and issued passports in Tonga during the 1990s.

Tonga's police commissioner Steve Caldwell is a New Zealander. His position is funded by the NZ government's aid program, which largely pays for Tonga's police and courts. The NZ Serious Fraud

Office played a major role in the passport investigation. Possibly in retaliation for the arrests, Police Minister M?teni Tapueluelu has since made a cabinet submission to dismiss Caldwell over the alleged importation of prohibited weapons and large amounts of ammunition by the armed forces and police.

These episodes point to the instability of Tonga's autocratic and semi-feudal political system and also highlight the extent of New Zealand imperialism's direct interference in the country's affairs.

The New Zealand ruling elite has always considered Tonga to be part of its neo-colonial sphere, along with Samoa. The impoverished country is a significant source of cheap labour for the New Zealand and Australian agricultural sector. Both imperialist countries are intervening throughout the Pacific to assert their control and push back against China's increasing economic influence, which has been encouraged by the Tongan monarchy.

Last August King Tupou dissolved parliament on the advice of Tu'ivakano, who was then the speaker. Tu'ivakano declared that a bill, which sought to give cabinet direct responsibility for appointing positions such as the police commissioner and attorney general was "a clear attempt to erode the powers of the king and privy council."

A snap election in November resulted in a decisive win for the Democratic Party of incumbent Prime Minister 'Akilisi P?hiva, who was reinstated by vote of the parliament.

Conflicts appear to be intensifying between the king and the unelected nobles, who appoint nine of the 26 MPs in parliament, on the one hand, and the "pro-democracy" faction headed by P?hiva, on the other.

New Zealand-based Tongan academic Malakai Koloamatangi told Radio NZ last year that P?hiva's

government “bent on reform may have pushed too hard.” The proposals to take away the constitutional power of the king to deny assent to bills before they become law, would effectively take the king out of the law-making process.

Pʻhiva became prime minister following the 2014 elections, supported and promoted by Canberra and Wellington. The regional powers remain frustrated, however, at the slow pace of pro-business economic “reform” in Tonga, and are alarmed at China’s strengthening ties with the country.

Tonga took out a \$US118 million low-interest Chinese loan a decade ago, which the country has since been hoping would be written off as aid. The Chinese government has provided Tonga with a significant amount of aid, but has not written off the loan, for which a strict repayment schedule is expected to begin this year.

During his first official visit to New Zealand in August 2016, Pʻhiva came under pressure over a Chinese passenger plane operating in Tonga, which did not comply with New Zealand’s civil aviation laws. After the plane was gifted to Tonga by Beijing in 2013, New Zealand issued travel warnings and suspended \$NZ10 million of aid, causing outrage in Beijing.

These political tensions have been building up for more than a decade. Following public sector strikes and anti-monarchy riots in 2006, which profoundly shook the Tongan elite, Australia and New Zealand sent troops to the impoverished country to protect their strategic and economic interests and prevent Tonga’s political crisis from spiralling out of their control.

Under pressure from Canberra and Wellington, the Tongan government responded with limited measures to “democratise” the electoral system. Beginning with the 2010 election, the monarchy agreed to increase the number of elected MPs in parliament from 9 to 17, with 9 seats reserved for nobles. Further constitutional changes saw the king relinquish some of his powers. The royal family also divested itself of business assets.

The regional powers have no concern for the social conditions and basic democratic rights of ordinary Tongans, but have pushed for market liberalisation. The royal family implemented some pro-market measures in the past decade—leading to increased social inequality, poverty and unemployment. But as far as Australia, New Zealand, and the International Monetary

Fund are concerned, not enough has been done to open up Tonga’s markets and resources for exploitation.

This month, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern visited Tonga as part of a high-powered Pacific tour. It followed a speech by NZ Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters at the Lowy Institute in Australia on the need for New Zealand to be more assertive in the Pacific against “external actors and interests,” especially China.

During the visit, Peters announced the appointment of a new high commissioner, Tiffany Babington, who will lead the delivery of \$US47 million of investment over three years, focused on the areas of “energy, policing, justice and education.” Key parts of the state apparatus, in other words, will remain under New Zealand’s control.

The geo-political rivalry destabilizing Tonga’s fragile political order is likely to worsen. Significantly, King Tupou and his deputy prime minister were both in Beijing for the duration of Ardern’s visit. The king’s week-long absence also coincided with the arrest of Tu’ivakano.

Tupou and Chinese President Xi Jinping proclaimed a new “strategic partnership” between the nations. China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said China-Tonga relations had entered a new stage of rapid development since 2014 when Xi paid a visit to the Pacific, pledging increased support for economic and infrastructure development.



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