

Political upheaval in Samoa produces electoral stalemate

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Nearly three weeks after Samoa's elections, the country's leader of 22 years, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, of the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), is on the verge of being ousted by former deputy and Samoa's first female MP Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, leader of the new FAST (Faith in the One True God) party.

The HRPP has ruled the small Pacific island country for 39 years, with Malielegaoi one of the world's longest serving prime ministers. Despite having only been formed last June, and running 50 candidates against HRPP's 100, FAST held the HRPP to a dead heat in the April 9 poll. Each party won 25 seats in the 51-seat parliament, with one going to independent Tuala Iosefo Ponifasio.

The government-appointed head of state, Afioga Tuimalealiifano Vaaletua Sualauvi II, immediately declared the creation of an extra seat, on the pretext of meeting a requirement that women make up at least 10 percent of MPs. The allocation of the new seat to HRPP candidate Aliimalemanu Alofa Tuuau put the party in the lead. But Tuala then announced that he would support FAST, leaving the two parties tied on 26 seats each.

The creation of the extra seat was attacked by the opposition as a manoeuvre to win the election, but Malielegaoi defended it, saying it was "to make sure we have enough women in parliament." FAST filed a lawsuit challenging the move as unconstitutional and launched a further Supreme Court case over an opposing MP who has a criminal conviction.

Which party becomes the government is likely to be decided in the courts. But the election result is already a major defeat for the ruling HRPP, which had expected to be returned with at least 42 members. Journalist Keni Lesa told Radio NZ that people "wanted change, and

have been very vocal about it... It is something I haven't heard for a very long time, since I've been covering elections in this country."

Damon Salesa from Auckland University described the election as the country's first truly "competitive poll," involving campaigning, billboards, endorsements, social media and party manifestos. He noted that the total number of votes favoured the HRPP by up to 20 percent, but in some electorates there were as many as four candidates for the HRPP, resulting in vote splitting. A total of 128,848 people had registered to vote.

Traditionally, elections have seen people voting on the basis of personal and family alliances, church connections and individual favours. This has allowed the current prime minister to sway local elections and act as "king maker." Malielegaoi has been the dominant political figure since independence from New Zealand in 1962. Previously a public servant, he entered politics in 1981 after completing a commerce degree, becoming finance minister and then prime minister in 1998.

The country's political structure is highly undemocratic. Matais, the country's clan chiefs, wield immense power over family welfare, land, property, religion and politics. Until 1990, only matais could vote and stand as electoral candidates. Candidates for the Legislative Assembly must still hold a matai title.

FAST undoubtedly benefited from opposition to growing inequality, poverty and authoritarian measures by the ruling hierarchy, which has produced growing social tensions. Moreover, the coronavirus crisis has exacerbated Samoa's plight. While border closures and geographic isolation have so far kept COVID-19 case numbers down to three, the tourism industry is in a state of collapse. With the country in recession and a

foreign debt of \$US 1.2 billion, the government is in no position to borrow to prop up the business sector.

GDP is just \$US4,324 per capita and one quarter of this comes from remittances from expatriate families, many of whom have been hit hard by job and income losses. Before the pandemic, an estimated 20.3 percent of the population lived below the national poverty line, and unemployment was about 14.5 percent, according to the World Bank. The Asian Development Bank expects Samoa's economy to shrink by 5 percent in 2020, and 9.7 percent this year.

The electoral districts in Savai'i, the bigger and less developed of the two main islands, voted overwhelmingly in favour of the new party. A major factor was the government's disastrous handling of the deadly 2019 measles epidemic. Public anger erupted after it was revealed that the government had ignored advice in 2018-19 to launch a mass vaccination campaign. Officially 83 people, mainly children and infants, died unnecessarily, and no commission of inquiry has been held.

The HRPP also suffered controversy over legislation changing the way land disputes are resolved. About 80 percent of all land in Samoa is in customary ownership, and the constitution places an absolute bar on the sale of customary land.

Three bills, passed into law in December last year, grant the Land and Titles Courts sole power to determine matters of land ownership, according to Samoan customary law, and give the court its own appellate structure, beyond the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court. Opponents claimed the removal of the Supreme Court's jurisdiction and oversight would grant fono (village councils) power to make decisions without any possible redress for human rights breaches, and increased corruption. FAST harnessed this dissatisfaction, saying it would seek to repeal the three controversial bills, although a two-thirds majority of the house is needed.

FAST's rise was generally welcomed in the international media, with numerous references to its female leadership. The party, however, represents a dissatisfied faction of the ruling elite, and in no way represents a progressive alternative to the HRPP.

FAST was set up amid escalating tensions inside the ruling HRPP. Fiame was a member of HRPP, and became Samoa's first female cabinet minister, and

from 2016-2020, deputy prime minister. She is the daughter of Samoa's first prime minister following independence and is highly connected internationally, particularly in New Zealand, where she was educated.

Neither party contested the election with a program that would in any way address the deepening social, economic and health emergency. The HRPP campaigned on promises of more infrastructure development and vague pledges to improve educational outcomes and hospital services.

FAST's manifesto contained equally vague references to "equitable development" and "having a sustainable economy to benefit all people," while promising more support for businesses. FAST declared its aim was to "ensure our people live in social harmony," which means, primarily, the promotion of "culture and Christian practices."

Significantly, FAST has signalled it wants to shift Samoa's foreign policy into line with the US and its regional imperialist allies, Australia and New Zealand, as Washington's aggressive confrontation with Beijing intensifies. Tuala said he was supporting FAST because it had called for a "review" of Chinese investment and immigration.

According to the *Samoa Observer*, "Canceling the construction of the Chinese-funded \$250 million Vaiusu Wharf project was a key part of the party's policy manifesto." MP-elect Leatinuu Wayne So'oialo had campaigned on the issue, claiming that China would turn the wharf into a military base—an unsubstantiated claim that was denied by the Chinese Embassy. China's loans and economic influence throughout the Pacific have been a source of alarm for Washington and its allies.

Whichever party of the Samoan ruling elites eventually assumes office will confront not only a sharp economic and social crisis, but the escalating dangers posed by climate change and the US-led war drive against China.



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