

Samoa's government embroiled in political turmoil

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The first day of sitting of Samoa's parliament on January 21 ended with a threat by Prime Minister Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa. She warned that if a vote of no confidence was tabled against her, she would advise the head of state to dissolve parliament and call a snap election.

Fiam?, who has a year to run in office, has for weeks faced a political upheaval threatening an early end to her term. Her leadership of the small South Pacific island country is under challenge by a faction within her own party, the Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) party.

A no confidence motion would require 27 votes to pass, making both the FAST faction and the parliamentary opposition pivotal in deciding the outcome.

Speaker of the House Papali'i Li'o Taeu Masipau has not been drawn into a discussion or vote on Fiam?'s position. He declared last week that it was "not a topic to discuss at this time. There is no peace that comes from it for our Parliament." He said internal FAST issues should be resolved by the caucus itself.

Opposition leader and former prime minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi of the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) thanked the speaker, indicating he would not initiate nor join a confidence vote, at least for now.

In early January, FAST's Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries La'auli Leuatea Schmidt confirmed he was facing criminal charges. These included conspiracy or an attempt to defeat or pervert the course of justice, and three counts of false statements causing harm to a person's reputation.

Police Commissioner Auapa'au Logoitino has not made public any details of the charges. La'auli has maintained his innocence, saying, "I am clean from all of this." The government has denied rumours that have spread through social media that La'auli has been charged in relation to the death of Tu'uau Maletino, an 18-year-old student killed in a hit-and-run in 2021.

Following La'auli's refusal to resign as minister, Fiam? removed his portfolio, citing the need to uphold the integrity of Cabinet, and then went on to remove three more ministers and 13 associate ministers.

La'auli, who remains chair of FAST, announced on January 15 that 20 caucus members had voted to remove Fiam? from the leadership and expel her from the party along with five other cabinet ministers: Tuala Tevaga Ponifasio (deputy prime minister), Leatinuu Wayne Fong, Olo Fiti Vaai, Faualo Harry Schuster, and Toesulusulu Cedric Schuster.

Fiam? responded by saying the party could remove her as FAST's leader, but not as prime minister. She told reporters: "It is... the Parliament of Samoa who can make the decision on whether or not I stay as prime minister or step down."

Fiam? presently remains in office but her position hangs by a thread. Officially, if an MP ceases to maintain affiliation with the political party under which they were elected—whether through resignation or expulsion—their seat is declared vacant, with by-elections held to fill vacancies.

Samoa's turmoil reflects broader political instability across the Pacific, which is bound up with sharp shifts in global politics under the escalating capitalist crisis. The fragile and impoverished region is especially susceptible to economic stresses and social pressures. Of the 20 countries in the world with the highest annual losses as a share of GDP from natural disasters, eight are in the Pacific.

According to the 2023 Samoa Poverty and Hardship Report, 21.9 percent of Samoa's population lives below the basic-needs poverty line, 3 percentage points higher than in 2013-14. Poverty is highest among private sector workers and those in subsistence agriculture. Unemployment is officially 9.4 percent.

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic saw GDP contractions reported for three consecutive years, which severely affected the welfare of Samoan households. The tourism sector and others such as handicrafts and retail took heavy losses due to the closure of international borders. Some 80 percent of households who receive money from families overseas have been hit by drops in remittances.

The health system permanently struggles. For every 1,000 babies born in 2022, 16 died before their fifth birthday. A potentially deadly whooping cough outbreak declared in

November is continuing, with case numbers reaching 321 on January 5. Only 38 percent of cases have had hospital care, while 101 are babies under 12 months old. A deadly but preventable measles epidemic in 2019 killed 83 people, mostly young children.

Conditions of poverty and under-development provoke widespread instability. The Pacific's imperialist powers, including Australia, New Zealand and France have maintained neo-colonial control over the region for more than a century, keeping the island nations in a state of dependency.

The eruption of social unrest and rioting in Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia last year has been met with brutal military-police crackdowns. New Caledonia's pro-independence government collapsed on Christmas Eve after seven months of unrest by alienated indigenous Kanak youth.

Nearby, Vanuatu last week held a snap election, called before December's devastating earthquake, due to a no confidence vote against the government. In Tonga, A new prime minister has also just been installed after months of rancour between elected officials and King Tupou VI, resulting in a series of resignations.

Fiam? was installed in the wake of a prolonged political and constitutional crisis that followed the April 2021 elections. The HRPP, which had ruled unchallenged for 40 years, refused to accept its defeat by the then newly established FAST party.

The standoff was eventually settled in the FAST's favour by the courts. Backed by both Wellington—Samoa's former colonial ruler—and Canberra, she was presented as a moderniser and a "safe" pair of hands. As a former member of HRPP, she was the first woman to hold the offices of cabinet minister and deputy prime minister.

The US-led preparations for war against China were a central factor in Fiam?'s winning the support of the imperialist powers. While Tuilaepa was regarded as a long-time ally of Beijing, Fiam?'s first act in office was to abandon a Chinese-backed port development, signalling a realignment towards Washington. She said the \$US100 million project would have significantly added to the country's financial exposure to China, which accounts for 40 percent of external debt.

The United States and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand have continued to ramp up the pressure on Pacific governments to reduce their ties with China.

The 56-member British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), hosted by Samoa last October, was dominated by tensions over the climate crisis and warmongering. Britain, Australia and New Zealand used the meeting to promote the further militarisation of the Pacific while dismissing demands for meaningful action on

climate change.

In an attempt to alleviate Samoa's economic crisis, Fiam?'s government has sought to maintain and strengthen ties with China. In November 2024, shortly before the eruption of Samoa's political crisis, Fiam? visited Beijing for the first time as prime minister and met with President Xi Jinping. China promised increased economic development assistance and investment in Samoa, and both countries pledged to uphold nuclear non-proliferation in the Pacific.

This meeting will not have gone unnoticed in the imperialist centres, which are demanding complete submission from Pacific Island countries. *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan reported on X on January 18 that the "Trump 2.0" agenda to counter China in the Pacific involves the blunt "prioritisation of US interests over Pacific Island concerns."

Maclellan cited a report from the right-wing think tank, The Heritage Foundation, which flatly criticises former President Biden's 2022 Pacific Partnership Strategy as "too focussed on Pacific islanders." Rebutting Pacific insistence that climate change is the region's top security issue, the Foundation flatly rejects the "overemphasis on combatting the effects of climate change as a vital American interest."

"The single most important factor that drives the renewed interest in US engagement with the Pacific Islands is their pivotal location, which is important to US efforts to deny China's regional hegemonic ambitions that directly threaten American security, prosperity, and freedom," the report stated. It remains to be seen to what extent such "engagement" by the US and its allies has contributed to Samoa's political crisis.



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