

Samoa faces early election after government's budget voted down

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Samoa's parliament was dissolved on June 3 after the government of Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mataʻafa failed a week earlier to have its 2025 Budget approved. Conceding defeat, Fiamē advised the head of state, Tuimalealiʻifano Vaʻaletoʻa Sualauvi, to dissolve the Legislative Assembly and call an early election. A date has been set for August 29.

Fiamē has led a minority government since being ousted as leader of the Faʻatuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST or “Samoa United in Faith”) party in January. MPs from both the opposition Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) and her former FAST party joined forces to vote down the budget with 34 against, 16 in support and 2 abstentions.

Fiamē, who was due to hold office until general elections in April 2026, had for several months faced political upheaval under challenge by a majority faction within FAST. The small South Pacific country has a population of just 217,000.

FAST split in January when Fiamē removed party chairman Laʻauli Leuatea Schmidt, who was Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, from Cabinet. In turn, Laʻauli ejected her from party membership, leaving her isolated and leading a minority government. In the 51-member parliament, the FAST majority had 20 MPs, the HRPP 18, with Fiamē 15, including herself and five independent MPs.

The crisis erupted after Laʻauli publicly confirmed he was facing criminal charges. These include conspiracy and an attempt to defeat or pervert the course of justice, and three counts of false statements causing harm to a person's reputation. Court proceedings began last week, but what precisely he is accused of has not been made public.

Maintaining his innocence, Laʻauli refused to resign as minister, whereupon Fiamē relieved him of his portfolio and went on to remove three more ministers and 13 associate ministers.

On February 25, with the support of the FAST majority, Fiamē defeated a no-confidence vote moved by HRPP leader Tuilaʻepa Saʻilele Malielegaoi, 34 votes to 15. On March 6, this time with Tuilaʻepa's help, she defeated a challenge mounted by Laʻauli, 32 votes to 19.

FAST then initiated legal action to try and secure an early general election, seeking a Supreme Court ruling on whether it was legal for Fiamē to rule with a minority government. “It's unconstitutional. Parliament should be dissolved as soon as possible and next year's election brought forward, in a bid to peacefully resolve the ongoing political crisis,” Laʻauli told Radio NZ (RNZ).

In a visit to New Zealand last month, Fiamē told the media her focus was to complete her term, adding: “My reading is no one really wants to go to an early election.”

The political crisis has unfolded against the backdrop of a deteriorating economy and increasing social tensions. The basic problem facing all factions of the ruling elite is how to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class and rural poor.

In the turmoil surrounding the government's collapse, little has been said about the contents of the failed budget—the first to not gain parliamentary support in 40 years. Parliament was adjourned after the vote on the budget's first reading on May 27, less than an hour into its sitting. Few details of the budget have been released.

In a preview the previous day, the *Samoa Observer* listed mounting economic and social problems. The national hospital was “falling apart,” suffering understaffing and under-resourcing. The rising cost of living was “not making life any easier for most people,” it declared, while minimum wage earners were struggling. Pay rises for civil servants and nurses were urgently needed, plus an increase in social benefit payments. The agriculture sector's contribution to GDP meanwhile had slumped by almost 11 percent and fisheries by more than 50 percent, forcing an increased reliance on imports.

In late March, Fiamē declared a 30-day state of emergency amid continuous power outages and electricity rationing. She later said the economic impact of the crisis—brought about by faulty and storm-damaged infrastructure—was estimated to have cost up to 16 percent of Samoa's gross domestic product. This undoubtedly had a significant impact on the budget.

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 a 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 2013¹⁴. Poverty is highest among private sector workers and those in subsistence agriculture. Unemployment is officially 9.4 percent.

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic saw GDP contractions for three consecutive years, severely affecting the welfare of households. Tourism and retail took heavy losses due to the closure of international borders while there was also a sharp drop in financial remittances from families overseas.

US President Trump's planned tariffs, including a 10 percent tariff on goods from Samoa, will have a devastating impact. More than 22 percent of Samoa's exports go to the US and American Samoa (a US colony).

Trump's withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO) creates a deep funding gap. In 2022, the WHO disbursed \$US9.1 million in the Pacific across 320 projects.

The 90-day pause on USAID funding is causing further confusion and distress across the Pacific. The US exit from the Paris Accord has been condemned locally as a setback for action on global warming, exacerbating the existential threat of rising sea levels.

A member of Samoa's chiefly elite, Fiam? was installed after a political and constitutional crisis that followed elections in April 2021. The newly-formed FAST defeated the HRPP, which had ruled unchallenged for 40 years. Backed by Wellington—Samoa's former colonial ruler—and Canberra, she was presented as moderniser and "safe" pair of hands. As a former member of HRPP, Fiam? had been the country's first female cabinet minister and deputy prime minister.

Fiam?'s predecessor as prime minister, Tuila?epa, who held office for 20 years, was considered by the imperialist powers as too pro-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.

Attempting to alleviate Samoa's economic crisis, Fiam?'s government then sought to maintain and strengthen ties with China. Last November, just prior to the latest crisis, Fiam?

visited Beijing 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.

In New Zealand in May, Fiam? told RNZ the Pacific was facing a "tough time with geopolitics." While she did not elaborate, the region has become a tinderbox, as the United States, abetted by Australia and New Zealand, escalates diplomatic, military and economic pressures over Washington's advanced preparations for war 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.

The summit was trumpeted as providing a potential boost to Samoa's economy, but this has proved illusory. Promises, regarding social and economic development, made in the 2021 general election campaign remain unfulfilled.

The alienation and hostility of the majority of people towards official politics is reflected in low voter registration: just 53 percent of eligible voters had registered to vote, as of June 1.

Fiam? and her cabinet members have now formed a new party, the Samoa Uniting Party, to contest the August election against FAST, HRPP and three other parties.

Washington and the local powers will doubtless maintain a close watch on developments. Despite Samoa's small size, its strategic location makes it vital to US efforts to advance its war planning in the region against China.



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