

Elite “noble” installed as new Tongan prime minister

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A member of Tonga’s “noble” elite, Lord Fakafʻnua, has been selected as the Pacific nation’s new prime minister, ousting incumbent Dr ‘Aisake Eke. The pair contested a vote at the Fale Alea (parliament) on December 15, three weeks after general elections in November.

Fakafʻnua won the secret ballot held among MPs by 16 votes to 10. He is only the second noble to be PM since the 2010 constitutional reforms, which saw numbers in the legislative assembly shift in favour of the 17 “commoner” MPs elected by the public. Prior to that, Tonga’s parliament was entirely dominated by nobles and the monarchy.

Tonga’s government, however, is still an undemocratic monarchy, currently ruled over by King Tupou VI. In the parliament, nine representatives are chosen by just 33 hereditary nobles. Only nobles are eligible for the roles of speaker and deputy speaker.

Fakafʻnua’s installation signifies the nobles’ full return, consolidation of the aristocratic principle and tightening royal dominance. The limited “democratic” reforms that began under the late ‘Akilisi Pʻhiva, prime minister from 2014–2019, supported by sections of the state bureaucracy and business, face being reversed.

Pʻhiva, a former teacher who first won his seat in 1987, led what was known as the “pro-democracy” movement. But his governments, which represented a privileged layer of the upper middle class, proved totally incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations and basic social needs of the majority of Tonga’s 100,000 inhabitants, who live in severe poverty.

New Zealand and Australia helped fund the “reform” process. The local imperialist powers, Tonga’s main source of foreign aid, supported the absolute monarchy for decades but became increasingly concerned about

popular unrest. They also demanded pro-business measures, including the withdrawal of the royal family from business ventures, as well as government spending cuts and the privatisation of assets.

Anti-royalty riots had erupted in 2006 amid escalating social tensions, decimating the capital Nukuʻalofa. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the economy further deteriorated, with entrenched poverty and social crises, including a methamphetamine epidemic and high levels of non-communicable diseases.

Under Pʻhiva’s government, the monarchy remained effectively in charge. The royal family, nobility and a small business elite live in relative luxury, benefiting from ownership or interests in telecommunications, satellite services and energy. Meanwhile, most families rely on subsistence agriculture and remittances from family members working abroad.

According to the latest data, poverty levels have reduced somewhat since 2015, but remain high—running at 24 percent in 2021 with child poverty at 28 percent. This understates the level of hardship since the official poverty line is an income of just 6,058 Tongan paʻanga per year, or about \$US2,618.

Widespread alienation from the political set-up was evidenced by sharply declining voter participation in the November poll. Just 49.4 percent or 31,988 of registered voters cast ballots, even lower than the 2021 election turnout of 62 percent.

A former parliamentary speaker, Fakafʻnua is the fourth prime minister in five years. He has landed estates in the four main island groupings of Haʻapai, Niua, Vavaʻu and ʻEua. He is a member of Tonga’s royal family through his mother—a granddaughter of the late Queen Salote III—and has noble lineage through his father. His sister is married to the Crown Prince.

In the leadership vote, at least seven of the so-called “people’s MPs” voted for Fakafʻnua against Eke. According to local media reports, horse-trading over a proposal to sell Tongan citizenship could have been involved in the support for Fakafʻnua. Media outlet *Kaniva Tonga* reported it had obtained leaked details of the scheme to enable foreigners to buy citizenship for \$US190,000 to help fund the government, which faces a billion-dollar shortfall in its infrastructure budgets.

Tonga, like several other Pacific nations including Vanuatu and Nauru, has a murky history of selling passports. In the 1980s and 1990s, thousands were sold, including to former Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Fakafʻnua confirmed his backing for the new proposal. “It needs to go through the appropriate due process, checks and balances, and ultimately debated in the house and approved by the King,” he said.

Fakafʻnua’s elevation by a small, privileged group of MPs follows escalating domestic and regional tensions in which Tupou VI has used his royal prerogative to inject himself directly into political affairs. In August, the parliament legislated to give the king more control over foreign policy with a bill which replaced the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a new entity called His Majesty’s Diplomatic Service.

The bill was tabled by Crown Prince Tupouto’a ‘Ulukalala in the wake of Tupou VI declaring last year he had “lost confidence” in the handling of the defence portfolio by then Prime Minister Hu’akavameiliku Siaosi Sovaleni. After Siaosi Sovaleni resigned as prime minister in late 2024, Tupouto’a was appointed Foreign Minister and Minister for His Majesty’s Armed Forces.

Kaniva Tonga expressed concern that handing full control of Foreign Affairs back to the monarchy “threatens to unravel Tonga’s fragile democratic progress” and was “a retreat from accountable governance toward unchecked monarchy.”

The restoration of the power of the monarchy and nobles reflects the shift to authoritarian forms of rule by governments around the world amid the escalating crisis of capitalism, imposition of mass austerity and the US-led drive to war—in which the entire Pacific region is deeply involved.

In nearby Samoa, the election in August of the

Fa’atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST or “Samoa United in Faith”) Party’s new leader Laʻauli Leuatea Schmidt as prime minister heralded a sharp shift to the right. With great fanfare, Laʻauli strengthened relations with Israel and then banned the *Samoa Observer* from government press conferences. A draft new media protocol now threatens to stifle press freedoms by controlling “negative reporting.”

There are sharp divisions between the Pacific ruling elites aligning with Israel and US imperialism and growing protests in favour of Palestine. Across the region at least half a dozen governments, including Tonga and Samoa, have either supported Israel at the United Nations or abstained in votes condemning genocide in Gaza. In defiance of popular opinion, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji both recently opened embassies in Jerusalem.

All Pacific governments are being required to adapt to soaring geopolitical tensions fuelled by the advanced US preparations for war against China. The US and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, are pressuring the Pacific countries to cut economic and diplomatic ties with China and join the aggressive region-wide confrontation.

With the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum at the centre of imperialist pressures, the organisation’s 2024 summit in Tonga endorsed a US-backed, Australian-led operation to establish the Pacific Policing Initiative, a multinational rapid deployment force for interventions against regional unrest, and to push back against China’s presence. Tonga’s former Police Commissioner Shane McLennan (an Australian) played a key role in its development.

In October, defence ministers from the three Pacific nations with standing armies—PNG, Fiji and Tonga—met in Chile with their counterparts from several imperialist powers, including the US, to escalate the militarisation of the Pacific region. The discussions were devoted to developing “operational collaboration” between their forces to face “new trends in security challenges”—targeting China.



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