

Fifty years after becoming independent, Samoa has become an important bastion of parliamentary democracy in the Pacific. Australia is playing its part in supporting the Samoan Legislative Assembly's ongoing development. Story: Jeremy Kennett

For a country boasting the largest islands in the Pacific outside of New Zealand and Hawaii, the independent state of Samoa is not always at the forefront of global discussions on Pacific politics.

A relatively safe, prosperous country with a stable government and an intact traditional way of life, it hasn't suffered the political and economic upheavals that typically draw the attention of the international community.

But while not always in the spotlight, Samoa is facing challenges that run just as deep as those faced by its neighbours. Maintaining the way of life, known as 'Fa'a Samoa', that has guided the country for so long, while meeting demands for change and development is proving a difficult balancing act.

As the representative body for its people, the Parliament of Samoa carries much of the responsibility for guiding the country through this period of

transition. However long-term funding and structural constraints mean many of the services needed to support the operations of a truly representative parliament have been unavailable.

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A new Samoa Parliamentary Support Project is aiming to tackle these issues and improve the Samoan Legislative Assembly's operations, allowing it to effectively represent its people and lead the achievement of development goals across the country.

Funded by AusAID and coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the project is centred on the Office of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, the parliamentary department responsible for administering the parliament and

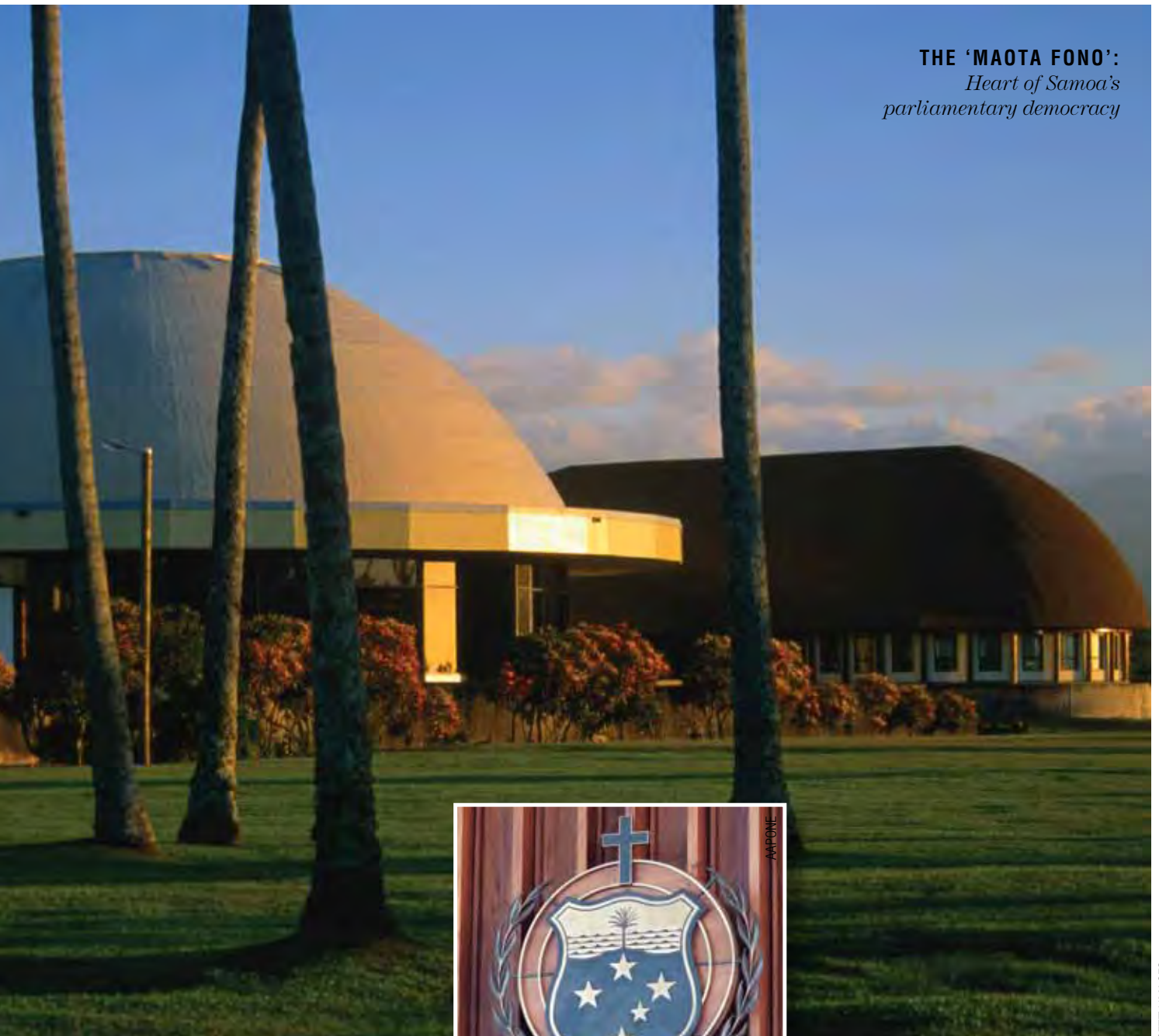


supporting its members and operations. Technical expertise for the project is being provided by the Australian and Tasmanian parliaments under a twinning program known as Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships, with the



Pacific pearl

THE 'MAOTA FONU':
*Heart of Samoa's
 parliamentary democracy*



University of Tasmania recently enlisted to assist with training and development.

The project has a long list of goals, from improving IT, research and library services to a complete restructure of the parliamentary administration and its functions.

Clerk of the Samoan Legislative Assembly, Fepuleai Ropati says one of the most important actions taken so far is the development of a community outreach office to foster greater engagement between the parliament and the community.

“The public engagement will bring people to participate and play their role as the public and to voice their concerns and opinions with bills, and that’s

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a way of improving the parliament’s role in scrutinising these things,” Fepuleai says.

“The people and public need to know that these people are their representatives, and they also have the opportunity to voice their own views, so what is passed by parliament as law is something that has been contributed to by all affected members of the community.”

The first target for the parliament’s community outreach program is to increase its engagement with the women of Samoa, and ultimately to increase women’s representation in the parliament. Currently only two of the 49 members of the Samoan Legislative Assembly are women.

Increasing the participation of women in public life is a key challenge for Samoa, which has historically been a patriarchal society. While change is coming slowly men still dominate positions of formal authority, particularly in the village communities which make up the majority of the country.

The imbalance in village life has a greater impact on a national level than might be expected, due to the influence and authority held by the village title holders, known as matai. Matai are the representatives of their families and communities, and form the councils which govern each village.

The matai council's area of control extends from the appearance and upkeep of each village to religious observance times and even local law and order. Only a small percentage of matai are women, and some villages ban women from their councils even if they hold such titles.

This lack of representation at the village level translates nationally, as only matai are allowed to nominate to represent their communities in parliament. While the numbers of female matai are growing, representation in parliament has actually fallen – there are half as many women now in parliament as there were following the 2006 election.

One of the two women remaining, Gatoloaiifaana Amataga Alesana-Gidlow, thinks the fall in numbers can be attributed largely to less effort by local women's groups to encourage women to nominate.

"The high number then was mainly due to a lot of publicity and engagement workshops by some of the women's groups to try and push women to go for election," Gatoloaiifaana says. "Perhaps that was one of the reasons why not as many women came through. There was not as much of a push in 2011 as in 2006 from the women's groups."

Since the results of the 2011 elections, the government of Samoa has decided to take responsibility for increasing women's representation into its own hands, putting forth a constitutional amendment requiring at least 10 per cent of parliamentarians to be women.

Based on a 49 member parliament, that means at least five seats would be held by women, with extra seats likely to be added to the parliament if not enough women are directly elected.

This would give Samoa its highest ever number of women MPs, as well as one of the highest rates of women's representation in any Pacific island nation.

Gatoloaiifaana says the legislation will be crucial in giving more women the confidence to stand for election, knowing there is a possibility of being selected even if they are not directly elected.

"It's going to really give confidence to women to come forward and run for election. Most women are a bit worried that if they don't win at the election that it's a disgrace on their character," she says. "I think it's going to open up the women to take that leap, take that step forward".

The push for a legislated increase in women's representation comes with Samoa reaching 50 years of independence and self-governance.

Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Assembly Charlene Malele says this is enough time for the parliament to start representing all the people of Samoa.



FIONA WAY

STEP FORWARD:

Gatoloaiifaana Amataga Alesana-Gidlow is one of two women MPs in Samoa, with hopes for more

"Given we've come 50 years, I think it's high time for the general public to be properly represented, demographically anyway," Ms Malele says.

"We've got to start from here and set the example for the rest, and hopefully not have to wait another 50 years for it to eventuate."

Ms Malele says the conservative nature of Samoan society in general means much of the responsibility for this change rests with the parliament.

"It might be irresponsible to actually compare the societal changes to the parliamentary changes, because Samoan society in most of its aspects is very conservative," she says.



FIONA WAY

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The issue is not restricted to Samoa. The Pacific region has the lowest level of women’s representation in the world, which is one of the major areas the Australian government plans to tackle in the recently announced 10-year, \$320m program to improve the political, economic and social opportunities for women across the region.

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee member Alan Griffin (Bruce, Vic) recently visited Samoa with Senate Deputy President Stephen Parry to participate in a community engagement workshop for Pacific island parliamentarians. He says the multimillion dollar gender initiative shows Australia’s level of commitment to help Pacific island parliaments better engage with women and other underrepresented groups, which was a key topic of discussion at the workshop.

But Mr Griffin also highlights the importance of existing programs such as the Samoa Parliamentary Support Project and Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships, which focus on direct links at an organisational level.

“I think it’s really important that it’s people to people links, you can learn a lot from a website, you can learn a lot from a book, but the way you often learn is in talking to people, being able to experience with them,” he says.

“I think the sort of work that’s being done between the parliaments gives a real opportunity for the Samoans to learn



BRIGHT FUTURE:

Samoa’s Legislative Assembly is building its capacity, led by the Speaker the Hon Laauli Leuatea Polataivao Fosi Schmidt

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from the Australian experience but I think also sometimes for Australia to understand the circumstances faced in a nation that is one of our neighbours but still is a long way away.”

For Ms Malele it is this strong, ongoing relationship with the Australian and Tasmanian parliaments being developed through the Samoa Parliamentary Support Project that is the most valuable result of the project.

“The value is immense,” she says. “As a young democracy in comparison to Australia I think we need all the exposure we can get.” •

Jeremy Kennett, a staff member in the International and Community Relations Office of the Australian parliament, worked for three months in Samoa as a project manager for the Samoa Parliamentary Support Project.