

THE People's KINGDOM

The South Pacific's last monarchy embraces democracy. **Story and photos: Andrew Dawson**



Every Sunday morning before church in the small Tongan village of Vaotu'u, a dozen well-dressed men gather around a large carved wooden bowl in the rather ramshackle community hall drinking kava.

The men look at ease sharing the latest news on village life mixed in with prayers and a few quips about the Tongan 'Coca-Cola' — the gently narcotic, muddy water, made from the roots of a kava bush, which they drink from halved coconut shells.

Sitting amongst them is their new democratically elected member of parliament Aisake Eke, who many locals voted for in the historic 2010 Tongan Legislative Assembly election. That election saw for the first time a majority of Tonga's parliamentarians directly elected by the people.

Previous parliaments were dominated by hereditary nobles chosen by a council of prominent landholders, and by cabinet ministers handpicked by the King of Tonga.

Before the last election, King George Tupou V (who passed away recently) agreed to relinquish his power to appoint governments without reference to the parliament. As part of the political reform process, the King also supported increasing the number of people's representatives in the legislative assembly from nine to 17. Previously the nine people's representatives enjoyed little say in a larger 32-seat parliament.

These 17 democratically-elected MPs now sit alongside only nine nobles. Together they decide who runs the government of this small South Pacific nation of 176 islands and 100,000 people, which has been a constitutional monarchy since 1875.

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FOR THE FUTURE:
Giving people a say in Tonga



It's been a big step towards democracy and Aisake Eke hopes the next big step to a fully-elected parliament happens soon.

"I think that is the direction where we are going — for a fully democratic system where all the people in the House are to be elected by the people," he says.

"Now it is a question of timing and when. I myself think that for the next election all the members of parliament need to be elected by the people. I think that is a realistic ambition."

Despite high rates of literacy and the highest number of PhDs per capita in the world, Tonga faces many challenges. Its largest source of income is from the many thousands of Tongans living abroad in Australia, New Zealand and America who send money home. Foreign development assistance also supports the economy, particularly by funding infrastructure projects. Beyond

the dusty streets of the bustling capital Nuku'alofa, many rural Tongans make a modest living off subsistence farming of root crops such as taro, cassava and yams, mixed in with work on coconut and banana plantations or fishing.

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Leading pro-democracy campaigner and longest serving MP Akilisi Pohiva welcomed 2010 as a significant milestone because for the first time it was the 26 members of parliament and not the monarchy who chose Tonga's prime minister.

Jailed twice, Mr Pohiva says it has been a long road to achieve democratic reform in Tonga. He believes the public campaign eventually convinced

the monarchy to embrace greater democracy.

"I recall when it first started that the members of the nobility, and the monarchy as well, they did not really support the idea," he says. "But we have been struggling so hard since we started at the end of the 1980s up to now. We have been able to convince His Majesty to endorse what we have been struggling for."

While in 2010 his Democratic Party of the Friendly Islands won 12 of the 17 popularly elected seats in the 26 seat chamber, Mr Pohiva was unable to muster enough support to be elected prime minister ahead of the nobility's candidate Lord Tu'ivankano. The nine nobles swayed five newly-elected MPs to side with them to form government.

The presence of those nine nobles in the small assembly remains a sticking point for Mr Pohiva and other pro-democracy campaigners.



“We still have a small group of nine nobles who are not democratically elected,” Mr Pohiva says.

“They are not accountable to the people unless we have a fully elected government. From now on until that time, we will continue to face problems especially during the deliberation and discussion in the House because the nine nobles always take sides with the cabinet ministers.

“Now we have a half democratic form of government so there is still halfway to go. His Majesty has already surrendered his executive power to cabinet and to parliament — that is the most significant aspect of the political reform.”

In such a deeply religious nation as Tonga, where nearly everyone attends church on a Sunday and the constant sound of bells and hymns wafts across the islands, it comes as no surprise that the first chairman of the pro-democracy movement in 1991 was a Catholic priest, Father Seluini Akau’ola. While welcoming the latest reforms, he suspects it may take decades before Tongans accept a fully elected parliament.

“I think it will be almost the same length of time since we started in 1991. At the moment we do not elect the nobles’ representatives — but we are moving towards that,” he says.

Father Akau’ola says the nobility will always remain very influential in Tongan life because they are the owners of so much land and because in Tongan culture it is so ingrained to respect them as their leaders.

“If you remove the nobles from parliament you also remove that link to the land,” he says. “Also there is a social

setting where people would take them fresh fruits and look up to the hierarchy. It is inbuilt in the Tongan people.

“So to remove that — you can’t just replace them with anyone there on the hierarchical level to be the person that people will look up to on a social level. It was the King who finally said ‘yes I want the change, we must have this’, and then the parliament agreed to it.

“To remove power from certain levels is not easy. It can be a threat. But at the same time it can be a happy ending with a peaceful solution and better for the whole country.”

It was looking far from being a peaceful transition in late 2006, when much of downtown Nuku’alofa went up in flames and eight people died during riots that followed street protests calling for more democratic representation. Hundreds were arrested for looting and five pro-democracy MPs including Akilisi Pohiva were charged with sedition, but were later acquitted.

The tragic loss of life and \$100 million in damage to the CBD seemed to focus the government’s attention on political reform, which until then had stalled.

One of the new people’s representatives Dr Viliami Latu, elected in 2010 from the island of Vava’u, says it was an easy decision for him to align with other independents and nobles to support the nobility’s candidate for prime minister. Dr Latu subsequently became the Minister for Tourism in the new government.

“While I was campaigning I explained to the people that Tonga was not ready yet for party politics,” he says. “When I was the clerk of parliament I

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A PEOPLE’S HOUSE: (clockwise from top left) Tonga’s parliament building; a Kava ceremony; Deputy Speaker Lord Tu’u’afitu; reformer Father Akau’ola; and Democratic Party MP Akilisi Pohiva

understood that the party system was not incorporated into our constitution and was not fully considered when the political reforms were debated in the House.

“So straight after the election the decision I made was simple. There wasn’t any official political party so I chose to be an independent. I aligned with those independent candidates to form the current government.”

Dr Latu is adamant Tonga will need to develop some fully fledged political parties first before embracing further democratic reforms.

“I think Tonga is ready to achieve full democracy,” he says. “But it is up to the current parliament and government to decide which kind of democracy Tonga is having.

“If we take for example the current structure of parliament, even though the Democratic Party of the Friendly



Islands claims to be a political party, this isn't officially incorporated into our constitution, or into our political structure. And that is the kind of thing that we should address in our transition to democracy."

Deputy Speaker and noble Lord Tu'i'afitu suspects further democratic reforms may take more than a decade to be realised.

"That is the move we are doing at the moment — first we start at the constituency level and that will help make the people more understanding of the new government and the reforms like political parties," Lord Tu'i'afitu says.

"At the moment Tonga does not have political parties. I think after these four years, with reform of parliament, we will have political parties. The full election will come in 10 years time or three terms from now."

The current Clerk of the Legislative Assembly Sione Tekiteki admits the future election of nobles to the assembly is one of a raft of issues yet to be resolved.

"A lot of people would think the reform process is over in terms of political reform but in my view it is an on-going process," he says.

"There is a lot of reform we are trying to do in the parliamentary secretariat and I am sure the government is trying to do a lot of internal reforms within the government itself and I am sure these reforms will be on-going. In terms of political reform there has been a little discussion in the House about the election of the nobles by the people. I don't know when that will take place but these sorts of issues are being discussed."

According to Aisake Eke, democracy is all about a government being fully accountable to its people.

"That is the expectation from the movement towards a more democratic system — for more accountability. For people to be accountable for the money paid to government in the form of tax and also fees. Our role is basically to accomplish that purpose.

"It is not only good for the people to know what is going on and how government is spending money but also to make the government conscious of being scrutinised and being accountable for this. The government needs to always have at the back of their mind that they will be reviewed and scrutinised to make sure they do things, the right things in the right way and get the right outcomes."

Akilisi Pohiva agrees, saying accountability and transparency are the most important things. "In the past the government did not really respond to the people. That is why we want a new democratic form of government — a government that is accountable and is transparent. These are the two significant aspects of democratic forms of government. Another related aspect is for the people to participate and have a say in running the government — that was not the case in the past.

"We may not be able to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our economic development unless we have a fully elected government."

Dr Latu insists the new government is already more accountable to the people of Tonga because it needs to respond to

criticism by non-government MPs and also various parliamentary committees.

"I do support the idea that in a healthy democratic form of government that there is a need for a very lively and very strong opposition party and that is what is currently happening here in Tonga," he says.

"I can say the current government is accountable to the people through different aspects of the work we are trying to do in Tonga. People are now realising the importance of working together with the government and we do believe at this stage we have done a very good job so far. We still receive criticisms from the opposition but that is the reality of democracy."

Father Akau'ola says all people in parliament should be elected on merit and not because of privilege.

"If we have everybody elected by the people then we can feel that we will really own the government and so the government will be accountable to the people and we feel then that we are part of the whole political situation and then people can say what they want to say and be free to say what they want to say."

Aisake Eke sees Tonga's move towards full democracy as inevitable.

"Once we have that system in place then all our interests, all our focus and all our purpose is basically all down to what is best for the country." •

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Andrew Dawson, media adviser in the Australian parliament, visited Tonga to assist the Tongan Legislative Assembly develop its community outreach program, to help connect Tonga's people with their parliament. The project is part of a broader parliamentary strengthening program, called Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships, being coordinated for six Pacific parliaments by Australia's federal, state and territory parliaments in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and with funding from AusAID.