

Tuvalu's 2024 general election: a new political landscape

by Jess Marinaccio

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Former Tuvalu Prime Minister Kausea Natano at COP28

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On Friday 26 January 2024, Tuvalu went to the polls for its general election. After voting **results were announced** over the subsequent 24 hours, Tuvalu emerged with a somewhat altered political landscape.

In Tuvalu elections, candidates run for two parliamentary positions on each of Tuvalu's eight islands of Nukulaelae, Funafuti, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Nui, Niutao, Nanumaga, and Nanumea. This year, 32 candidates ran for the 16 positions.

On three islands, Nukulaelae, Nanumea, and Nukufetau, both incumbents won re-election. Former Minister for Finance Seve Paeniu and former opposition MP Namoliki Sualiki Neemia ran unopposed in the southernmost island of Nukulaelae. Former Minister for Public Works, Infrastructure, Environment, Labour, Meteorology and Disaster Ampelosa Tehulu and former Minister for Education, Youth and Sport Timi Melei won in a crowded field of six candidates from the northernmost island of Nanumea. Tehulu won easily with 490 votes, while Melei, who won 296 votes, just edged out challenger Temetiu Maliga who received 246 votes.

In Nukufetau, former opposition leader Enele Sopoaga and former Foreign Minister Panapasi Nelesone, who had originally **won his seat** in a by-election in June 2023, both retained their seats, beating out two other candidates.

In the five other islands, however, at least one incumbent was not re-elected, and both incumbents from the central island of Vaitupu lost their seats.

In the capital, Funafuti, the incumbent Prime Minister Kausea Natano lost his seat while former Foreign Minister Simon Kofe, who stepped down from his cabinet role in July 2023 but remained an MP, kept his seat. Newcomer Tuafafa Latasi won the other Funafuti seat.

In Nanumaga, former Minister for Fisheries and Trade Kitiona Tausi, who **won his seat** in a by-election in July 2022, was unseated by civil servant Hamoa Holona, while former opposition MP Monise Laafai retained his seat.

In Niutao, former Speaker of the Parliament Samuelu Teo was unseated by **his brother Feleti Teo**, who was until 2023 the Executive Director of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). Feleti Teo has also held various other regional roles and is a former Attorney-General of Tuvalu. Former Minister for Local Government and Agriculture Sa'aga Talu Teafa, who **came to power** in a by-election in June 2022, retained his Niutao seat.

In Nui, former Governor General and Attorney General Sir Iakoba Taea Italeli unseated the only female MP serving in Tuvalu's previous parliament, Dr. Puakena Boreham, while former opposition MP Mackenzie Kiritome retained his place.

In the biggest upset, both the former Minister for Health, Social Welfare and Gender Affairs Isaia Taape and the former Minister for Transport, Energy and Tourism Nielu Meisake were unseated in Vaitupu, with former Tuvalu High Commissioner to New Zealand Paulson Panapa and climate activist Dr. Maina Talia now representing the island.

The loss by incumbent Prime Minister Natano along with three of the eight ministers from his government is notable. By contrast, only one of the five former opposition members lost their seats and opposition leader Sopoaga's re-election campaign was successful. This may suggest some dissatisfaction with the performance of the previous government. Natano was often overshadowed by his ministers internationally and former Health Minister Taape made some **questionable comments** during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to both of their losses.

What is perhaps more notable, however, is the profile of some of the newly elected MPs. Boasting among their ranks a former Attorney-General and Executive Director of the WCPFC (Teo), a former Governor-General, Attorney-General, and Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific (Italeli), a former High Commissioner to New Zealand (Panapa), and a well-known climate activist (Talia), the new MPs bring a wealth of experience, particularly on the international stage, that should prove highly beneficial to the new government.

This parliamentary profile also makes the race for the position of Prime Minister, which should be decided this week by the elected MPs, much more competitive. Incumbents Sopoaga, Paeniu, and Kofe were already possible contenders for the position, but the new MPs certainly have the qualifications to bid for the PM role or other high-level cabinet posts. As the MPs build their coalitions over the next week, there will be a number of personalities to contend with, which will require a careful apportioning of cabinet positions, as well as the speakership, to reach compromise.

From an international standpoint, several governments, including those of Australia and Taiwan, have undoubtedly been watching the outcomes of this election closely so as to gauge how Tuvalu will move forward with both the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union and its diplomatic relations with Taiwan. This is especially after **criticism of the Falepili Union** in Tuvalu's Parliament last year and **warnings last week** from Paeniu that he plans to review Tuvalu's ties with Taiwan under the new government.

Although Natano, who has now lost his seat, was one of the main proponents of the Falepili Union, Paeniu was equally enthusiastic. Other returning MPs like **Kofe have signaled** that they would not scrap the Union but would instead revise it, especially Article 4 on security. Only Sopoaga has vocally **stated his desire** to get rid of the Union altogether, so the Union is likely to survive this election although it will have to be revised.

As for Taiwan, although Paeniu has called for a review of ties, he has not gone so far as to call for a suspension of relations, and vocal supporters of Taiwan including **Kofe have been returned** to government. Paeniu's call for a review was strategic because it puts the new government (whoever is in charge) in a good position to renegotiate funding support from Australia, the US, and Taiwan or to attract major investments from China. Either way, funding for Tuvaluan priorities, including climate-change initiatives, health, and telecommunications, is likely to increase for this government.

The selection of the new prime minister and cabinet ministers will ultimately determine the new government's priorities and tell us more about the fate of the Falepili Union and Taiwan. However, the results of the general election, especially the election of several new candidates who are highly experienced leaders and diplomats, promises a new prominence for the Tuvalu government at the international level, even if the presence of so much experience might prove difficult for coalition-building in the short term.

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