

FAST or slow? Integrity and anti- corruption in Samoa

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Prime Minister Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa has vowed
to fight corruption

Photo Credit: FAST Party-Facebook

In 2021 Samoa hit the international headlines when, after an election marred by accusations of corruption and a tumultuous court battle, Fiam? Naomi Mata'afa became the country's first ever female prime minister. It was also the first time since 1982 that a party other than the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) had governed the country. During and after the constitutional crisis that threatened to derail her leadership, **Fiam? denounced the previous government** for its alleged corruption. **Explaining her decision to leave the HRPP** and become an Independent in 2020, she said:

It was a classic case of power and corruption ... We [HRPP] were slipping away from the rule of law, and I didn't like that. But most of [the] party were happy to go along with it.

Fiam? would later join the Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) party and lead it in the April 2021 general elections. In turn, **she vowed that as prime minister** she would restore and revive the fight against corruption and nepotism.

So, two years on, how is the new FAST government going?

To answer that question, we need to first look at what happened under the previous regime.

In a nationwide **Global Corruption Barometer survey** conducted at the start of 2021, just before the HRPP reluctantly relinquished power, 49% of respondents said corruption was a problem in the government, while 45% said it was a problem in the business sector. Samoan respondents were less concerned about corruption in these sectors than most of the nine other larger Pacific Island countries included in the study.

Moreover, according to the 2022 **Worldwide Governance Indicators**, Samoa has greater control over corruption than most of its Pacific neighbours – only American

Samoa and Tuvalu perform better. The country's control of corruption has also improved over time: from a percentile rank of 63 in 2008 to 72 in 2021 (with 0 the lowest rank and 100 the highest).

This improvement was likely aided by increased funding for key integrity agencies. According to [our analysis of budget documents](#), in real terms (in 2022 prices), in 2008-09 the HRPP government allocated 773,000 tala (AUD428,879) and spent 817,000 tala in recurrent funding on the country's Ombudsman's Office; in 2020-21 the HRPP government increased both allocations and spending for this agency to 1.8 million tala.

Other integrity agencies – including the Controller and Auditor General, the Public Service Commission, the Office of the Attorney General, and the police – also saw (less substantial) gains in allocations and/or actual spending over this period. The one agency to miss out was the Transnational Crime Unit (TCU) which is housed inside the Ministry of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It saw the government's allocation drop from 88,000 tala in 2008-09 to 53,000 tala in 2020-21. In 2020-21 the TCU only spent 34,000 tala of its allocation, likely because COVID-19 impacted efforts to combat transnational crime.

Still, overall, most of the state's key integrity agencies saw their funding increase under the HRPP.

However, the HRPP government did not do its legacy on integrity any favours in the last months of its reign, with many expressing concern about its role in undermining the rule of law during the [election and subsequent constitutional crisis](#).

To differentiate itself from the previous government, in its first budget (2021-22) the FAST party promised to increase funding for key integrity agencies. The Public Service Commission's allocated budget rose by a whopping 71%, an increase of 3.8 million tala. The police received a 22% bump of 8.2 million tala, the Controller and Auditor General's budget increased by 6% (an increase of 280,000 tala), and the Office of the Attorney General saw a 4% rise worth 207,000 tala.

Not all integrity agencies benefitted from the new government's inaugural budget. The TCU's budget allocation was essentially the same as the previous year. The Ombudsman Commission's allocation declined, in real terms, by 3%. However, most of the nation's key integrity agencies were better off.

In their subsequent 2022-23 budget, the government gave the Controller and Auditor General and the Public Service Commission a financial "haircut" by slightly reducing their recurrent funding (when adjusted for inflation). The Ombudsman Commission was promised a 2% increase, while the budgets of other key integrity

agencies remained steady. Still, all of these agencies bar the Ombudsman Commission were promised more funding than they *received* in 2020-21 under the previous government.

The new government's promised financial support for Samoa's integrity agencies is promising. However, it is far from certain whether their pledged largesse will materialise. In other jurisdictions across the Pacific – particularly [Papua New Guinea](#) – governments have come to power promising to increase funding to integrity agencies only to undermine and underfund them later in their rule.

The new government has also [mooted plans to develop an anti-corruption strategy](#), and has promised to [introduce a National Integrity Office](#) (an initiative of the previous government) by 2024 and [revive the once-abandoned National Prosecution Office](#). Again, all of this bodes well, but we will have to wait and see if, and in what form, these initiatives materialise.

It is important to acknowledge that increasing funding for existing integrity agencies, and introducing new ones, are not the only ways to address corruption in the country. A [review of Samoa's implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption](#) is a reminder that there are many ways that the country could improve its anti-corruption response.

While we'll have to wait and see if the FAST party can successfully build upon the perceived integrity gains made under the previous government, our analysis suggests that the new government's initial integrity and anti-corruption efforts appear to be moving in the right direction.

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