

# Meraia Taufu Vakatale: anti-nuclear activist and feminist trailblazer

by Asenaca Uliviti and Sadhana Sen

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Meraia Taufu Vakatale (centre) at an anti-nuclear protest march in 1995

*Photo Credit: photo supplied by the Vakatale family*

Fiji recently lost Dr Meraia Taufu Vakatale, a monumental woman leader who broke many glass ceilings with her numerous firsts. As an educationalist, diplomat and politician, she profoundly impacted the lives of tens of thousands in Fiji and the region, particularly young women in politics and anti-nuclear activists.

Dr Vakatale was Fiji's first woman deputy prime minister, the first woman to be elected as a cabinet minister, the first female to be appointed as a deputy high commissioner, and the first Fijian woman principal of a secondary school in Fiji.

Dr Vakatale was also a fervent anti-nuclear activist. In 1995 she took a costly stand against her party and the then Sitiveni Rabuka government on renewed French nuclear testing on Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia. Joining a protest march against French testing led to her losing her cabinet position in the Rabuka-led government, in which she served as a member of the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party.

She held the portfolio of Education, Science and Technology in two stints: from 1993 to 1995 and then, after being reinstated, from 1997 to 1999. In 1997 she was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. In 2000 she resigned as President of the SVT party over the 2000 coup fallout.

Dr Vakatale was a woman ahead of her time. Dedicated to her principles, she "paid it forward" to Pasifika generations by her fight to keep the Pacific a nuclear-free zone.

Dr Taufu Vakatale's spirited and unwavering determination, her activism, idealism and her principles inspired thousands of women and youth to fearlessly pursue their dreams.

## DEVPOLICYBLOG

The name Taufa Vakatale was first linked to the prestigious all-girls Adi Cakobau School when she became a pioneer student there in 1948, aged 10 years. She was also the first female student at the all-male Queen Victoria School. She completed her 6th form year at Suva Grammar School, where she became the first Fijian female to pass the NZ University Entrance. She entered the University of Auckland and in 1963 was the first Fijian woman to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree, privately funding her studies from her wages as a teacher in Fiji.

Taufa Vakatale went on to further studies in the UK from 1963 to 1971. On return to Fiji, she became the first Fijian woman president of the Fiji YWCA and principal of her old school, the Adi Cakobau School. The YWCA in Fiji was the driving force of the anti-nuclear protest movement in the early 1970s, while she was president.

In her time as an educationalist, Dr Vakatale disciplined fairly, understood her students, and entrusted them with positive goals for their future, instructing them to “leave the world better than we found it”. She was respected and honoured. Her feats helped ease the students’ own steps, to bring to life the Adi Cakobau School motto.

Of petite and elegant frame, in moral stature Dr Vakatale towered above many. In diplomacy she served as Fiji’s Deputy High Commissioner to the UK in 1980, whilst single-handedly raising her daughter to become a lawyer.

The University of St Andrews in Scotland awarded her an Honorary Doctorate of Letters for her contribution to the cause of Pacific women, while Fiji bestowed her with the Order of Fiji in 1996.

The extraordinary Dr Meraia Taufa Vakatale died on 24 June 2023 aged 84. She leaves behind her only daughter Alanieta Vakatale, three granddaughters, and many more following in her footsteps to leave this world a better place.

38 years on from the [sinking of the Rainbow Warrior](#) and the adoption of the Pacific nuclear-free zone treaty, the [Rarotonga Treaty](#), and with the imminent [release of Japan’s Fukushima nuclear plant radioactive waste](#) into the Pacific ocean, the leadership and sacrifices of Dr Vakatale must be hailed, and her life celebrated.

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Link:

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