

# New rules for nobles: Tonga's 2025 election

by Lopeti Senituli

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2023 Tonga national election  
Photo Credit: Facebook/KomisoniFili

Before the elections for the 17 People's Representatives on 20 November, the 33 Nobles of the Realm had two hours to elect their nine representatives to the **Tonga Fale Alea** (the House of Parliament). Although King Tupou VI is one of the 33, it was not made public whether he cast a vote in this or previous elections. But he certainly had a hand in the outcome on election day.

The coconut wireless reported that public complaints about behaviour unbecoming of a noble from residents of his estate in Puke generated Palace displeasure and saw **Fohe displaced** as one of three Nobles' Representatives from Tongatapu and replaced by **Maafu**, who had inherited his noble title on the death of his father since the 2021 election. Similarly, Ve'ehala, a veteran soldier and musician, became a candidate and representative, **replacing Nuku** from 'Eua because Nuku was debarred by a law that prevents a candidate from running if he has an outstanding debt to a litigant, sanctioned by the Supreme Court.

Previously, this law only applied to candidates for the 17 People's Representatives, but King Tupou VI is reported to have insisted that it should equally apply to candidates for Nobles' Representatives as well, **from this year's election onwards**.

An interesting aside, which also has possible implications for the rules of eligibility for elections of both Nobles and People's Representatives, was the **declaration of Fotofili** as being elected unopposed from the Niua constituency in the northernmost islands before voting began. There are only two nobles with estates in Niua's two islands, and the other noble is resident most of the year in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Fotofili also holds the title His Serene Highness Prince Kalaniuvalu, and the estate for that title is on Tongatapu.

Other nobles like him who own land estates on two or more different island groups must declare at nomination which of their estates they want to represent in the Fale Alea. Fakafanua, for example, the Speaker of the Fale Alea for the past 20 years, has consistently declared candidature from Ha'apai although he also owns land and lives on Tongatapu. The other successful new Noble's Representative is Ve'ehala,

who owns and lives on his estate of Fahefo on Tongatapu, and also has an estate on 'Eua. Apart from King Tupou VI, he is the only other noble in this position and, if the eligibility criteria are adhered to, he should be elected from 'Eua at every election. This is the first successful election under these rules.

Fotofili is the son of Princess Siuilikutapu, who had first married a commoner and lost her right to the throne as a result. Her subsequent marriage to Noble Kalaniuvalu produced two sons, with the older sibling (now deceased) inheriting the Kalaniuvalu title and the younger, the Fotofili title. Officially he is addressed as His Serene Highness, Prince Kalaniuvalu-Fotofili, and in Parliament he represents the estate of Fotofili and not the estate of Kalaniuvalu. The prefix denotes that he no longer has any rights to the Throne of Tonga.

Why have these two nobles chosen to be candidates from constituencies other than those where they live in Tongatapu? For Fotofili, the answer is obvious — there are only two possible candidates in Niua. With a gentleman's agreement that one does not vote for oneself, any vote results in a tie, resolved by drawing straws or a coin toss. The candidates have agreed to take turns representing the constituency each term. For Fakafanua, there are fewer rivals in Ha'apai. In Tongatapu there are 15 nobles vying for three seats; in Ha'apai, a maximum of five nobles vying for two seats. Both have consistently won in their chosen constituencies.

The question for future elections is whether candidates for the People's Representatives should be granted similar discretion to choose which island constituency they wish to represent. At the moment, Tongan diaspora candidates normally resident overseas are required to prove they resided continuously in the constituency they choose for a prescribed period before election day.

There were rumours that the **Crown Prince** would seek election as a Nobles' Representative rather than remaining a member of Cabinet as one of four ministers that the Prime Minister is permitted to nominate from anywhere, which is how he became a minister in the last Eke Cabinet. Eke had brought the Crown Prince into his Cabinet as Minister for His Majesty's Armed Forces and Minister for His Majesty's Diplomatic Services (formerly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), together with three professionals from the Tonga Civil Service.

The speculation is that they will all be reappointed to the new Cabinet if Eke is re-elected by the 26 members of the Fale Alea to continue as Prime Minister. The Crown Prince is guaranteed to return to Cabinet via the same constitutional window, but it will be more difficult for the others as the new crop of 26 representatives are high quality and could slot smoothly into any of the portfolios held by the unelected nominees.

Eke was elected Prime Minister, defeating Dr Viliami Latu with the help of seven out of nine of the nobles' elected representatives. But none of their names appeared on the list of Cabinet members that King Tupou VI approved in January this year. The norm is that the incoming Prime Minister includes one or two elected nobles in his Cabinet as reward for their support. Rumour is that the King did not approve of the nobles submitted by Eke. There are now two new elected Nobles' Representatives, and speculation is rife that Fakafanua has put his hand up as a potential Prime Minister or as a member of Cabinet. Eke is the frontrunner for Prime Minister as he clearly hit it off with King Tupou VI on election in January 2025, in marked contrast with the volatile royal relations with Prime Minister 'Akilisi P'hiva and Prime Minister Sovaleni.

A fair number of Cabinet members who had been elected to the previous Fale Alea as **members of PTOA** (Democratic Party of the Friendly Islands) had become disillusioned with PTOA and created their own version of a "pro-democracy" grouping. But three out of four PTOA ministers in the last Eke Cabinet had built a team of diehard supporters in their respective constituencies and, against all odds, retained their seats.

Making a surprise comeback was **Semisi Sika**, Deputy Prime Minister to 'Akilisi, who on his deathbed in September 2019, surrounded by his Cabinet, had verbally anointed Sika to replace him as Prime Minister and leader of PTOA. But Cabinet disintegrated on leaving the hospital emergency room that day, and as the majority of them were Methodists, they abandoned the anointed one because he was a Mormon. Semisi Sika beat the highly popular Dr 'Uhilamoelangi Fasi, the Minister for Education and Minister for Lands, to regain his seat.

The only successful woman candidate was Fane Fituafe, who **beat the incumbent woman representative**, Dulcie Tei. Dulcie had taken over from her husband, whose election was declared null by the Supreme Court because of violation of electioneering rules.

Improving the representation of women in Parliament is still a work in progress. The Constitutional and Electoral Commission in 2009 had received many submissions on the matter, and one of the recommendations was that Tonga should adopt the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system as opposed to the "First Past the Post" system adopted. STV, they recommended, is guaranteed to see more women representatives in the Fale Alea. For the sake of women and the whole country, this recommendation needs to be revisited.

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