

Samoa political update: Fiame prevails

by Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson and Lilomaiva Maina Vai

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Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa exits the Samoan Parliament building, 21 January 2024

Photo Credit: Samoa Observer/Junior S. Ami

Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, Samoa's first female Prime Minister, emerged from Parliament on 21 January 2025 with her leadership intact, despite deep divisions within the ruling Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) Party and significant political upheaval over the past two weeks.

The Speaker of the House, Papali'i Li'o Taeu Masipau, decisively addressed a letter from FAST, which informed him of the removal of Fiame along with Deputy Prime Minister Tuala Tevaga Ponifasio, Leatinu'u Wayne Fong, Olo Fiti Vaai, Faualo Harry Schuster, and Toeolesulusulu Cedric Schuster from the party. The letter also referenced a lack of confidence in Fiame's leadership and alleged discussions between the Government and the opposition. Papali'i rejected all claims, emphasizing that decisions about parliamentary seats must align with the Constitution.

"I have received a letter from the FAST Party concerning the removal of some of their members from the party. The letter raised questions about their parliamentary seats. Let it be clear: neither the Speaker of the House nor Parliament can, at this stage, make a decision that would result in the vacating of these seats in Parliament. The process must align with the rule of law," **the Speaker stated**.

The ***Electoral Act 2019 of Samoa*** outlines provisions regarding changing party allegiance by Members of Parliament (MPs). These rules are designed to maintain political stability and ensure that MPs adhere to the party alignment under which they were elected. Fiame and the affected MPs have not declared their exit from FAST or joined another party, ensuring their seats remain legally secure, as affirmed by the Speaker.

In response to FAST attempts to remove her, **Fiame dismissed 13 Associate Ministers**. They had aligned themselves with La'auli Leuatea Polataivao Fosi Schmidt, the FAST Party Chairman and former Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries,

in an attempt to oust her from the party.

Fiame had earlier removed three Cabinet Ministers — Mulipola Anarosa Ale-Molio'o (Women, Community, and Social Development), Toelupe Poumulinuku Onesemo (Communication and Information Technology), and Leota Laki Sio (Commerce, Industry, and Labour).

The Speaker also dismissed references in the FAST letter to alleged discussions between the Government and the opposition, citing a lack of verification. "Legal avenues outside Parliament are available for these matters to be pursued," he added.

Opposition leader Tuilaepa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, Fiame's predecessor, confirmed in Parliament that he had met with Fiame but clarified that the discussions focused solely on parliamentary matters and the smooth operation of the Government.

In her Parliamentary address, Fiame acknowledged the challenges within the FAST Party. "As Prime Minister, I must acknowledge that the primary cause of this issue stems from the charges against La'auli, the former Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries," she said.

Fiame removed La'auli from his Cabinet role after he refused to step down following charges filed by the Samoa Police Service. The resulting fallout led to internal dissent within FAST, tit-for-tat removals of Ministers and Associate Ministers, and attempts to oust Fiame from the party and her role as Prime Minister.

Emphasizing the importance of adhering to constitutional principles and due process, Fiame further stated in her Parliamentary address, "These challenges are not unprecedented. In 1982, similar divisions within the HRPP led to multiple changes in leadership before the government stabilised."

Regarding divisions in the FAST party, she said in Samoan: "Ua va le fogava'a." Translated: there is a rift in the alignment of the canoes.

Despite this she reaffirmed her commitment to her role: "My Cabinet and I remain committed to fulfilling our duties as outlined in the law."

She apologized to the nation for the disruptions caused by the unrest and called for mutual respect and adherence to the rule of law. "My leadership defers to the rule of law to conduct my work. The rule of law is the umbrella that protects all Samoans under equal treatment under the law," Fiame added.

In an unexpected move, opposition leader Tuilaepa expressed full support for Fiame's leadership. "Myself and our party – the only thing that we will do is to follow

what I have said in the past on 26th July in 2021. I said: ‘Fiame, here is our Government, lead the country. We put faith in you and 500% support.’”

Tuilaepa’s endorsement, along with the Speaker’s firm stance on upholding the rule of law, has been widely viewed as a stabilising factor during a turbulent time for Samoa’s Government.

To fill the gaps left by the dismissed Ministers, **four new Cabinet members were sworn in earlier in the week**. They are: Faleomavaega Titimaea Tafua (Commerce, Industry, and Labour), Laga’aia Ti’aitu’au Tufuga (Women, Community, and Social Development), Mau’u Siaosi Pu’epu’emai (Communications and Information Technology), and Niu’ava Eti Malolo (Agriculture and Fisheries).

The session marked the conclusion of a 20-day period of political unrest, social media harassment, attacks on press freedom and significant cabinet restructuring. With less than a year remaining in her term, Fiame faces the dual challenge of managing internal divisions within FAST while steering the Government toward stability.

The Speaker’s decisive handling of the FAST letter, combined with the opposition leader’s support, has reaffirmed the rule of law as the cornerstone of Samoa’s democracy. While challenges remain, the Government now has a clearer path to focus on its legislative agenda and governance responsibilities.

Samoa faces high stakes, with more twists, turns, and potential crises likely to unfold in the months leading up to the elections. The political landscape remains fragile, and the nation’s stability hangs in the balance. A steadfast commitment to the rule of law will be crucial as the country navigates this turbulent period.

Adding to the tension is the role of the Samoan diaspora, who amplified the political divide from abroad, fueling the ongoing discord. As the election approaches, only time will reveal how these dynamics will shape Samoa’s political future.

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