

# Tonga's new Prime Minister, Dr 'Aisake Valu Eke

by Lopeti Senituli

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Tongan MPs Tiofilisi Tiueti and Mo'ale Finau, former Prime Minister Siaso Sovaleni and new Prime Minister 'Aisake Eke

*Photo Credit: Facebook/Falealeaotonga*

Dr 'Aisake Valu Eke was elected Prime Minister of Tonga on 24 December 2024, defeating Dr Viliami Uasike Latu, the other candidate, by 16 votes to 8 in a secret ballot. The election resulted from **the shock resignation** of Siaso Sovaleni Hu'akavameiliku on 9 December, pre-empting a discussion and ballot on the second Vote of No Confidence (VONC) in his government in the third year of his four-year term.

There are 26 elected members of parliament, 17 Peoples' Representatives and nine Nobles' Representatives. On 24 December, one Nobles' Representative, Prince Kalaniuvalu-Fotofili, was absent and a second, Lord Fakafanua, was officiating as Speaker. The other seven Nobles' Representatives all voted for the new Prime Minister. This would have disappointed the outgoing Prime Minister because, in his resignation speech on 9 December, with perfunctory apologies to King Tupou VI and the Nobles' Representatives, he made a direct and passionate appeal to Dr Eke to use his experience and knowledge in setting up his new government and not to rely on the Nobles' Representatives for support, for it was obvious that they had withdrawn their support for him out of fear of His Majesty. He said, "I had thought that this country had been granted freedom, but it is obvious that there are still limitations placed on that freedom. So, let me be the sacrificial lamb so that your vote can be held in total freedom."

Dr Eke is academically well qualified for the post. He attained his first degree in Economics from the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the 1980s and his doctorate from the University of Southern Queensland in 2013. Former USP Economics Professor Dr Wadan Narsey told me in 2005 that he regarded Dr Eke as the best of his undergraduate economics students of his year in the 1980s and did his best to lure him into an academic career at USP, to no avail.

He was first elected to Parliament as an independent in 2010 after the constitutional and democratic reforms. Before that he had been the Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Finance and National Planning for over ten years and had remained

aloof from the public agitation for reform. In parliament he generally sided with the government, but in 2011 voted with members of the Democratic Party of the Friendly Islands — Paati Temokalati ‘a e ‘Otumotu Anga’ofa (PTOA), of which Samuela ‘Akilisi Pohiva was leader — against a government bill increasing travel allowances for members of parliament on official sick leave overseas. In January 2014, Prime Minister Tuivakano, against whose bill he had voted, appointed him to replace Lisiate Akolo as Minister for Finance. He won his seat again in November 2014 and was again appointed Minister of Finance, this time by ‘Akilisi Pohiva as Prime Minister, in January 2015. The Deputy Prime Minister in that Cabinet was Siaso Sovaleni Hu’akavameiliku. But in February 2017, Dr Eke abstained in the ballot on a VONC against ‘Akilisi Pohiva and the Cabinet of which he was member and was subsequently turfed by ‘Akilisi Pohiva. The VONC instigators had accused the latter of nepotism, straining relations with Indonesia by speaking out for West Papua, not following due process and wasting government funds. By abstaining, Dr Eke was effectively giving some level of credence to these accusations.

In an interview he granted to [Radio New Zealand](#) in March 2017 after he was sacked Dr Eke did not elaborate on the reasons for his abstention but said he wasn’t surprised at being dumped.

He said, “No this isn’t surprising at all. The only surprise I had was the reasons given for my resignation, because when I abstained, I thought that is not going against the current government, but I just wanted to share those issues I felt was important. But the decision has been made and there were two factors — two factors that the prime minister quoted in the initial letter directing me to resign. One is related with the definition of a vote of no confidence and also the differences in the way we have conducted our work. The second factor was the surprise to me, he had never raised any concerns about how we are conducting as far as government is concerned.”

He was also asked about his future in politics and whether one scenario might involve his heading up a government that contained mostly nobles. His response was, “No, not at all. I’m one who actually believes in working together, because that’s the only way you can move forward our government. I think the political agenda, they used a very divisive one to segregate the Nobles’ and the People’s Representatives, and it’s not a healthy one, it’s not one that’s perfect for Tonga socially, economically and politically. So, we have to get unity and move forward, that’s the only way we could make a stronger Tonga, going forward.”

King Tupou VI dissolved Parliament in the third year of a four-year term in July 2017. In the subsequent general elections in November of that year, Dr Eke was defeated by the PTOA candidate (who also had ‘Akilisi Pohiva’s blessing) for the

Tongatapu 5 constituency, Losaline Maasi. He stayed out of Parliament from 2017 to 2021, undertaking consultancies and running a family remittance business. He regained the Tongatapu 5 constituency in the November 2021 elections and was one of three candidates for the position of Prime Minister, which was won by Siaosi Sovaleni Hu'akavameiliku. The third candidate was Pohiva Tu'i'onetoa, who had served as Prime Minister during the 2019-21 period.

Politically, Dr Eke is his own man, and he adapts to the situation around him — witness his abstention in the ballot on the VONC against Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva and his Cabinet, of which Dr Eke himself was a member, in 2017. Witness too his voting in favour of a VONC against Prime Minister Tuivakano and his Cabinet in 2012, because he was personally against the proposed major increase in member's allowances when on official sick leave overseas. Despite these shows of independence, he is a royalist at heart, and he favours working with Nobles and the King.

As the Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum until the 2025 summit in Honiara, there is no doubt that he will pick up where his predecessor left off in relation to the safe issues like climate change, regional policing and drug proliferation. There is however a huge question mark over how he would approach fundamental political issues such as support for the inherent right of self-determination of the Kanaks of New Caledonia and of the indigenous people of West Papua.

Try as one may, one cannot discount the spectre of King Tupou VI's reasserting his role in the affairs of state, for which he has constitutional powers. When he **withdrew his royal confidence and trust** in the previous prime minister and a Cabinet colleague in early 2024, they had to charter a plane to the northern-most island of Niufo'ou in order to reaffirm their loyalty and obeisance to him in traditional Tongan style. After Dr Eke was elected Prime Minister on 24 December, he had to travel to Auckland for an audience with His Majesty. The country eagerly awaits the return of the royal entourage in early February so that Dr Eke can be sworn in as Prime Minister.

In all previous appointments of Prime Ministers, after their elections by the members of Parliament, their swearing-in was relatively routine and prompt. This time round, His Majesty is playing hard to get, which makes his point — that he has a crucial role to play in the affairs of state.

### **Author/s:**

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/tongas-new-prime-minister-dr-aisake-valu-eke-20240115/>