

Tonga's PM Hu'akavameiliku throws in the towel

by Lopeti Senituli

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King Tupou VI, outgoing Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni Hu'akavameiliku and Interim Vice Chancellor Dr Tangikina Steen at the Tonga National University graduation ceremony, 4 December.

Photo Credit: PM Press/Facebook

In a highly anticipated session of the Tongan parliament to debate and vote on the second vote of no confidence (VONC) in Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni Hu'akavameiliku and the Cabinet, Hu'akavameiliku surprised everyone by **announcing his resignation** even before the actual debate had begun. The session began with the Speaker, Lord Fakafanua, announcing the procedure for the day which was to have each of the seven grounds of the VONC read out, followed by the Cabinet's responses, after which each member of parliament would be allowed 10 minutes to make a statement for or against.

Before parliamentary staff started reading out the documents, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Samiu Vaipulu moved that the VONC be declared null and void as it did not have the 10 valid signatures that the house rules stipulated. He claimed that two of the 10 signatures were added on 10 October, whereas an event included in VONC did not begin until 21 October, thus making those signatures invalid. That event was the 2024 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which was held in Samoa, 21 to 26 October, and the VONC cited it in relation to alleged Cabinet overspending on overseas travel.

After an hour and half of debate on the DPM's motion, the Speaker ruled that despite the technical shortcoming, he would proceed with the VONC at 2:00 PM after the lunch break. Hu'akavameiliku immediately asked for a break, as only 10 minutes remained before the lunch break, but the Speaker sided with VONC supporters and ruled that the debate begin straight away. That is when Hu'akavameiliku asked for the floor and proceeded to thank everyone from the King to the nobles and his Cabinet members and the movers of the VONC before announcing his resignation.

The second VONC had been tabled on 25 November. The Speaker instructed the parliamentary committee responsible to scrutinise it for compliance with

parliamentary rules and determine whether additional information was needed before making it available to the Prime Minister and Cabinet by 29 November. Hu'akavameiliku was initially required to submit his response by 3 December for debate and ballot. But on 28 November the Speaker granted his request for more time, rescheduling the debate to 9 December. The movers of the VONC were not happy, particularly given that the first one submitted in August 2023 had contained 46 grounds (compared with seven in the second), to which the Prime Minister and Cabinet had responded to in detail within five days.

There is reason to suspect that there was more to the request for extension than meets the eye. The inaugural graduation ceremony for the Tonga National University, which opened in January 2023, was held over three days beginning 4 December, with the University's Chancellor, King Tupou VI, officiating. Hu'akavameiliku, as Pro-Chancellor and Chair of the University Council and Minister for Education and Training, facilitated the first day's ceremony. That date, 4 December, marked the 1845 coronation of King Siaosi Tupou I, the founder of modern Tonga. Notably, King Tupou VI was absent on the second and third days, with Lord Fakafanua and Hu'akavameiliku stepping in to play the Chancellor's role.

In a media conference on 25 November after the VONC was tabled, Hu'akavameiliku defended the VONC movers' constitutional right to introduce it, but also said that since he only had a year left of his four-year term, he would have preferred a dialogue about their concerns. He gave the impression to the media was that he had the numbers to defeat this second VONC. However, his numbers were tight. As of 10 November, his Cabinet had nine members, reduced from 10 after his Minister for Lands and Survey, Lord Tu'i'afitu, resigned after receiving a letter from the Palace Office saying King Tupou VI had withdrawn his confidence and trust in him as minister. Of the nine remaining members, four were People's Representatives (PRs), including the Prime Minister, two were Nobles' Representatives (NRs) and three were Non-Elected Representatives who could not vote on the VONC.

So, with six votes in hand, Hu'akavameiliku needed eight more to beat the VONC. He could usually count on five PRs – Tevita Puloka, Dulcie Tei, Sione Taione, Veivosia Taka and Mo'ale 'Otunuku – and possibly three NRs that could have sided with him, Lord Tuiha'angana, Lord Fakafanua and Prince Kalaniuvalu. But there was a question mark over Prince Kalaniuvalu's allegiance as he had voted in favour of the first VONC in September 2023.

The movers of the second VONC were confident they had the numbers this time round. Lord Tu'ilakepa, who had voted against the VONC in 2023, was one of the signatories this time around. Hitherto, Lord Tu'ileakepa had almost always voted

with the Prime Minister and was loathe to be associated with members of parliament who had any pro-democracy inclinations. The seven PR signatories were Dr Langi Fasi, Mateni Tapueleuelu, Dr 'Aisake Eke, Piveni Piukala, Kapeli Lanumata, Mo'ale Finau and Vatau Hui. They were also guaranteed the vote of Dr Tanieta Fusmalohi, still making his way back from COP29. So, they had 11 guaranteed votes, and 13 if the recently resigned Minister, Lord Tu'l'afitu, and Prince Kalaniuvalu sided with them. As with the first VONC, the NRs would play a crucial role, controlling nine of the 26 seats (over 33% of the parliament) despite representing less than 1% of the country's population.

Since King Tupou VI **withdrew his confidence and trust** in Huakavameiliku as Minister for Defence and Fekita 'Utoikamanu as Minister for Foreign Affairs early in 2024, the Prime Minister continued as Acting Minister in those two portfolios. There was hope that substantive Ministers would have been appointed (from the Royal Family) by the time of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders Meeting in Nuku'alofa in August 24, but it was not to be. In spite of the *hulouifi* (traditional reconciliation ceremony) performed in February, relations between the King and Hu'akavameiliku remained strained. One cannot help but think that the Palace Office was at least supportive of the VONC, if not amongst the instigators.

As PIF chair until next year's leaders' summit in Solomon Islands, Hu'akavameiliku reportedly felt let down by King Tupou VI's absence from the country during the Leaders' Meeting – not least because his father, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, and his brother, Prince Tuipelehake, were instrumental in setting up the PIF (South Pacific Forum, at that time) in 1972. Together with Fiji's Ratu Kamisese Mara, Cook Islands' Sir Albert Henry, Nauru's Hammer De Roburt, Samoa's Malietoa and Niue's Robert Rex, they walked out of the then South Pacific Commission (SPC) when they could no longer stand being treated like children by the colonial powers (US, France, UK, the Netherlands, Australia, and NZ) at the annual SPC meetings and their refusal to include decolonisation and nuclear testing on SPC's agenda.

The Speaker immediately recessed parliament after Hu'akavameiliku's announcement. By the time it reconvened at 2:00 PM he had a letter from the Palace Office saying they had received the PM's resignation in writing. In spite of vociferous opposition from some of the VONC movers, he announced that, under section 18 of the Government Act, DPM Samiu Vaipulu would be Acting Prime Minister (in an interim Cabinet of existing members) until 24 December, when Parliament is scheduled to elect a new Prime Minister from its existing membership of the house.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/tongas-pm-huakavameiliku-throws-in-the-towel-20241210/>