

Uncharted waters

II: an update on politics in Tonga

by Lopeti Senituli

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Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and Crown Prince Tupouto'a Ulukalala of Tonga after the 2024 Japan-Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue
Photo Credit: Japan Ministry of Defense/Twitter

Tonga's Crown Prince Tupouto'a 'Ulukalala recently led a government delegation to the second [Japan-Pacific Islands Defense Dialogue](#). Members of his delegation included the current Prime Minister's defence advisers as well as officers of His Majesty's Armed Forces.

No official public statement was issued explaining why the Crown Prince led the delegation. The last remotely related public statement was issued by the Acting Prime Minister on 6 February in response to King Tupou IV's withdrawal of confidence and consent in the Prime Minister, Hon. Hu'akavameiliku Siaosi Sovaleni, as Minister for His Majesty's Armed Forces and in Hon. Fekitaloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism.

That statement declared the Prime Minister's confidence in and support for his Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism [but left open the question of the Prime Minister's own role](#) as Minister for His Majesty's Armed Forces. Now we have the makings of an answer.

Prime Minister Hu'ukavameiliku led a delegation, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism, to the northern-most island of Niuafo'ou in early March to seek an audience with King Tupou VI. This followed an emotional exchange in parliament on 29 February with Lord Tu'ivakano, former Prime Minister and Speaker.

Claiming to be speaking on behalf of all the Nobles' representatives (some of whom are in Cabinet) Lord Tu'ivakano's words to parliament were:

Tupou has said that he is unhappy with some of those he has appointed, but he did not say that he has sacked or dismissed them. No. It is an expression of his feelings. But you have said publicly that you will legally challenge His Majesty. Who are you to challenge His Majesty, the King of Tonga, who has ultimate authority over the country? ... Challenging His Majesty is dangerous.

In response, the Prime Minister avowed his respect for the King and said, “I apologise if any of my behaviour is misconstrued as being disrespectful to the *Hau* (King) of Tonga”. Ultimately, he agreed with Lord Tu’ivakano’s proposal for the adjournment of parliament to allow Cabinet to travel to Niuafou’ou and apologise to the King through a traditional *Hu Louifi* ceremony.

The *Hu Louifi* is a ceremony in which miscreants offer apologies to and beg forgiveness from the aggrieved for their behaviour. The last time a major *Hu Louifi* was held was in 2008 when the people of Mu’ā (the villages of Tayakamotonga and Lapaha on Tongatapu) apologised to the Late King George V for the burning down of one of the houses at the royal property of Uoleva during public agitation for political reforms in November 2006.

The Prime Minister and delegation arrived in Niuafou’ou, where the King had travelled to oversee some rehabilitation work, on 7 March. King Tupou VI received them at the grounds of a traditional Tongan royal *fale* on the shores of the volcanic lake on the island. Neither the Palace Office nor the Prime Minister’s office issued a statement on what was said. There was merely a social media post showing pictures of the delegation flanking the King Tupou VI, with the lake as a backdrop.

It is important to note that there would have been no need for such a *Hu Louifi* if the offices of the Prime Minister and the King had allowed the constitutionally sanctioned processes for dialogue to operate. Article 50A(3) of the constitution stipulates that “the Prime Minister shall regularly and as required report to the King upon matters that have arisen with the government and upon the state of the country.”

As far as I am aware, the last time this constitutional stipulation was respected was prior to August 2017 – which is when King Tupou VI ordered the dissolution of parliament and the holding of fresh elections. The then incumbent prime minister, the late Hon Samuela ‘Akilisi Pohiva, won fresh elections in November that year with a “party” majority, enabling him to govern on his own without the assistance of the Nobles’ representatives or of the pro-royalist People’s representatives. After that victory, he was only invited to the Royal Palace once: to receive his commission as Prime Minister in January 2018.

Unsurprisingly, Prime Minister Pohiva was unhappy with not being invited back so that he could fulfil his duty as Head of Government. He and I often discussed his frustration over the Royal rebuff. The last time we did so was in early 2019, when I suggested he consider doing a *Hu Louifi*. He absolutely refused! He told me he had done nothing for which he should apologise. He added,

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It is my constitutional duty to report regularly to the King and I have a right to be invited to the Palace through the front door. I will not go through the kitchen door or through a *katupa* [cultural window]!

In my view, it's also the case that Prime Minister Hu'akameiliku has done nothing for which he should apologise to King Tupou VI. He had every right to say what his deceased predecessor said about the *Hu Louifi*. Had he been allowed to report regularly to His Majesty, any differences in opinion might have been resolved privately without the country being subjected to the rigmarole we are now witnessing.

As for the Crown Prince becoming, apparently, the new Minister for His Majesty's Armed Forces – he would make a good one and has the academic qualifications for it. He will be sitting on the Kingdom's throne someday, and the defence minister's role is a good training ground. However, he should be appointed via the Prime Minister's prerogative to nominate ministers from outside of the 26 elected members of Parliament. Or he could stand for elections as a representative of the Nobles come the next general elections in November 2025.

What of the incumbent Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism? The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Patricia Scotland, is currently making her first official visit to the Kingdom from 30 March to 3 April. Local media have carried pictures of her arriving at the airport and in a meeting with Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku at his office and at church on Sunday. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism was nowhere in sight. Rumours are that she will be replaced by Tonga's former High Commissioner to Canberra, the Crown Prince's older sister.

The King and His Privy Council met in Vava'u on 28 March. Parliament will reconvene on 4 April and I expect the Prime Minister to tell the country that he has been trumped!

This is the second blog in a [two-part series](#).

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