

# Without vision, where is political reform taking Tonga? asks Dr Sitiveni Halapua

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**By Pesi Fonua**

Tonga's political reform introduced an elected government for Tonga in 2010 when constituencies voted for their favourite personalities, but the process lacks vision, according to the architects of the reform.

Dr Sitiveni Halapua believes that Tonga's new electoral system needs to be revised, so that when a new government is elected into power, it should already have a clear vision of where they are taking Tonga.

Now an elected People's Representative to the Tongan Parliament, Sitiveni was the chairman of the former National Committee for Political Reform, and a member of the now dissolved Constitutional and Electoral Commission that made recommendations for how Tonga's current Electoral System should be structured.

## **Dr Sitiveni Halapua, in Tonga's parliament, 2006**

Sitiveni said that following the first Parliamentary Election in November 2010, the focus was immediately on who would become the new Prime Minister, and the Cabinet Ministers.

After members of parliament (nine Nobles and 17 People's Representatives) elected the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister went on to nominate nine ministers from the elected members, and two from outside the House, to be members of his minority government.

Sitiveni pointed out that it was only then, after the Cabinet was named, that the new government was in a position to formulate a vision of what they would like to achieve during their four years term in office.

He said that the nomination of cabinet ministers was based on their personality and their ability to exert their authority over their ministries.

But Sitiveni now believed that this line of thinking is counter-productive to Tonga's development, because government decisions are not based on working toward achieving the national vision, but to satisfy the demands of a personality or a group of people.

It is difficult because they all have different views and they have to find a way to work together.

"It is all very well that we drafted new legislation and amended the constitution, and the King has surrendered his executive powers, but the success of the reform is judged on the success of government, not on the success of the election.

When a government is formed their vision of Tonga's future should be already clear to the people who elected them, but the new system does not consider that process.

### **Improvements needed**

With the reform in place, there is no going back.

"I don't think the intention was that the reform was final, and once it was introduced it should remain unchanged. Once in operation, we should identify what needs to be improved and polished, and that is the true nature of any political reform. I don't think the reform was an end in itself," he said.

Sitiveni, the man who introduced the concept of talatalanoa or dialogue into Tonga's reform process, still believes that there is room for dialogue, compromises and consensus.

He believed that Tonga has taken the right approach with its political reform compared to the political reform process that has been adopted by developing countries worldwide and in the Pacific, where they often started their political reform process by drafting a new constitution.

"The problem with that kind of approach is that once you pass the new constitution, it makes it very difficult to change things without having to go through the process of amending the constitution," said Sitiveni. "I don't think the intention was that the reform was final, and once it was introduced it should remain like that, there is work to be done."

Looking at the structure of Tonga's new government with the Monarch

at the apex, over the Cabinet, the Legislative Assembly, and the judiciary, he said the highlight of Tonga's political reform was the surrendering by the monarch of its executive power to an elected Cabinet and Legislative Assembly, but apart from that, the monarch at the apex still retained a lot of power.

Sitiveni said that the veto power of the king was questioned, "but we proposed for the king to retain its veto power as a check and balance mechanism. He exercised this veto relating to the amendment to the Firearms and Ammunition, Act which was passed by the House." The late King George Tupou V's veto was publicly acclaimed.

Sitiveni, however, pointed out that there were concerns over a lack of transparency over how the Monarch goes about making his decision under those circumstances.

He said that the Monarch chooses the members of the Privy Council, and the members of a panel to nominate the Police Commissioner, the Attorney General, and the Lord Chancellor.

The Lord Chancellor in turn nominates the Chief Justice and judges of the Supreme Court and the Police Magistrate. The king is also the Chief in Command of the Tonga Defence Services.

With the new structure of Tonga's Constitutional Monarchy system of government only 14 months old, Sitiveni noted what the late King George Tupou V said in his first opening of the new parliament in 2011, and again in a speech that was read at the soft opening of parliament early this year, that the reform was an on-going process.

Meanwhile, improving the state of the Tongan economy remains a formidable challenge for Tonga's leaders.

"My main concern is our debt crisis which amounts to 45% of our Gross Domestic Product. This means that for every pa'anga you produce, 45 seniti goes to paying off public debt," he said.

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