

Tongan monarchy gets Howard's backing

Wednesday 22 November 2006, by [DENNY Pat](#) (Date first published: 18 November 2006).

At a joint November 17 press conference with his New Zealand counterpart Helen Clark, Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced that a "joint Australian-New Zealand force of both military personnel and police will, in response to a request from the government of Tonga, go to Tonga tomorrow morning".

Howard said that the Australian component of the force, which would be dispatched the next day, would consist of 50 Australian Defence Force personnel and 20 Australian Federal Police. For its part, the New Zealand government committed 60 soldiers and 10 police.

The force was despatched to help quell protests and riots that erupted in fury at the Tongan government's refusal to reform the island nation's archaic anti-democratic political system, which is dominated by a monarch and "nobles". According to a November 18 report by the Melbourne Age, "The Tongan government requested security assistance late on Friday, a day after riots erupted when the legislature looked likely to adjourn for the year without making a decision on expanding democracy".

Howard responded to the Tongan pro-democracy uprising in typical neo-colonial style, saying that Australia faces "instability in this part of the world ... it's one of the reasons why we have invested a lot more in defence, it's one of the reasons why we're buying and taking delivery of, in December, the first of four C-17 transport aircraft, because I expect that this will be something [Australia and New Zealand] will face, periodically in our part of the world ..."

On November 16, the Tongan government reportedly gave in to protesters' anger, foreshadowing 2008 elections in which a majority of the country's parliament would be elected by popular vote, according to a Reuters report the next day.

A November 16 Tonga Now report said: "At around 7pm today the People's Representatives [the nine MPs elected by popular vote] went on radio to announce that they have made an agreement with the Govt. to hold elections in 2008 and that there will be 21 members of Parliament to be fully elected by the people and 9 Nobles representatives to be elected by the nobility. A total of 30 members — down from the current 34. [Prominent pro-democracy activist and MP] Akilisi Pohiva has announced that they have won the struggle and now calling for the people and rioters to refrain from committing further damage."

Newswire.co.nz reported on November 18 that "order has been restored" in the Tongan capital Nuku'alofa, according to the country's police commander. According to the report, Pohiva "says he is not pleased troops are on their way from New Zealand and Australia, but he is not surprised. Akilisi Pohiva says the violence that erupted in Tonga on Thursday was a natural consequence of many years of fighting for democracy.

"He says the arrival of outside troops on Saturday is indicative of the vulnerability of the monarchy, which is no longer able to rule the country."

Massive pro-democracy protests rocked the Pacific nation in 2005. In May of that year, up to 20,000

people — in a nation of only some 102,000 — protested in the capital. The September 10 death this year of King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, succeeded by Siaosi Tupou V, had raised Tongans' hopes of democratic reforms.

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #691 22 November 2006.