

Tonga intervention slammed

Tuesday 28 November 2006, by [MUNCKTON Stuart](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2006).

Tonga's pro-democracy movement has attacked the Australian and New Zealand governments for sending more than 150 soldiers and police to the Pacific nation, demanding the intervention end. The foreign forces have ostensibly been sent to help "restore law and order" in the aftermath of rioting sparked by Tonga's monarch, King Siaosi Tupou V, announcing the closure of parliament for the year without implementing widely demanded democratic reforms.

According to a November 21 ABC Online report, pro-democracy leaders defied a government ban on gatherings of more than five people to hold a press conference to call on foreign troops to leave. Pro-democracy MP Clive Edwards said that the Australian and New Zealand force was associated with the unpopular monarchy and its repression following the riots. The pro-democracy leaders instead called for the Australian and New Zealand governments and Commonwealth officials to mediate talks with the government to resolve the dispute. They have called for the government of Prime Minister Feleti Sevele, who is appointed for life by the king, to resign and to be replaced by an interim government.

Tonga, an archipelago with a population of 102,000 people, is ruled by the king and "noble" families. The last remaining monarchy in the Pacific, the majority of the parliament is appointed by the king, with just nine of the 34 members of parliament popularly elected, and 12 out of the 14 of the cabinet members appointed for life.

Calls for democracy have grown among the increasingly impatient impoverished majority. Fuelling popular anger at the monarchy has been the way the unelected government has looted the country's public assets for the benefit of the king and other noble families. In a November 21 comment piece in the Australian, Gaurav Sodhi from the Sydney-based Centre for Independent Studies, pointed out that the king "controls Tonga's electricity generation, its beer company, half of its unexplored oil supply, one of its mobile phone companies, a cable television company, and the rights to Tonga's internet domain name, earning a multi-million dollar income annually. The King's enterprise instincts are so insatiable that he even attempted to sell the genetic information of his subjects to an Australian biotech company."

Sodhi pointed out that three-quarters of land is owned by the nobility, and much of the rest is idle. The resulting economic impoverishment of the majority has triggered mass emigration, with 80,000 Tongans living in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

In May last year, Tonga's largest-ever demonstration, involving 20,000 people, marched in the capital Nuku'alofa in a protest organised by the Human Rights and Democracy Movement. This was followed by Tonga's first-ever strike in July by public servants, which combined demands over pay with calls for more democracy. After six weeks the government caved in, granting a pay rise of up to 80% and agreeing to take the strikers' call for a commission to investigate implementing democratic reforms to cabinet. The death of King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV in September this year increased hopes that democratic changes would be implemented.

Anger at the failure of the government to implement democratic reforms boiled over on November 16 after the king closed parliament for the year without agreeing to any of the changes demanded by

the pro-democracy movement, which is led by the nine elected MPs. A pro-democracy demonstration in the capital led to attacks on government buildings and business linked to the king and other nobles in the government. A number of buildings were set on fire, destroying 80% of the buildings in the capital's CBD, according to a November 21 Associated Press report.

The government responded by introducing martial law, empowering the police and military to use "lethal force" to maintain order, and banning gatherings of more than five people, according to a November 22 Matangi Tonga article. The Australian and New Zealand governments joined the government in condemning the riots as "appalling".

Immediately following the riots, pro-democracy leaders claimed victory when the government agreed to changes that would see the majority of MPs elected by 2008. However, the changes have to be ratified by parliament, leading to the pro-democracy movement accusing the government of reneging on the agreement by going ahead with the closure of parliament on November 23 without passing the reforms, according to AP.

While ABC Online reported on November 23 that Australian troops would adopt a "softly, softly" approach to restoring "stability" to Tonga, the November 21 New Zealand Herald reported that NZ soldiers had been authorised to use "lethal force" if there is a risk to "the lives of New Zealand soldiers or the property they have to protect" . In other words, NZ troops have been given the right to kill civilians in order to protect property stolen from the Tongan people by an unpopular and unelected government.

For the Australian government, the intervention is part of its neo-colonial push in the region, whereby Australia increasingly flexes its military and economic might to strengthen domination over the impoverished pacific nations. It is an intervention aiming to strengthen an anti-democratic regime, and assist the regime in repressing its population in order to help protect Australian corporate interests.

P.S.

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