

After the 2014 general election, Tonga now joins five other states (three of which are also in the Pacific Islands region) in having no female members of their lower or single house of parliament. Since Tongan women won the right to vote and stand as candidates in 1951, there have been only seven women parliamentarians — four women elected as people's representatives, and three appointed to parliament by the king or the prime minister. Significant political reforms in 2010 changed the makeup of parliament, with democratically elected people's representatives now making up the majority of seats (17 seats, with a further nine elected by the 33 nobles), and parliament electing the prime minister. Pohiva is the first commoner prime minister of Tonga to be elected by parliament, with the king's formal appointment. During this democratic transition, parliament has continued to be dominated by men, with no women elected either in the 2010 or the 2014 general elections. In Tonga, there are provisions in the constitution for the prime minister to nominate up to four cabinet ministers to be appointed from outside parliament, and in 2010 one woman, Dr 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki, was appointed to parliament; after the 2014 election, Pohiva declined to make any appointments, citing his past opposition to the practice.

Pohiva, in his inaugural address as prime minister, specifically raised the issue of the lack of female representatives in parliament: 'The issue of non-representation of women in the Legislative Assembly is not taken lightly by my government' (Pohiva 2015). In the speech, he promised to support action on the issue through voter education (*ibid.*). He has also been reported to be open to considering legislative reforms to increase women's representation in parliament (WCCC 2015).

Tonga's parliament has never seen more than two women representatives in a single parliamentary term, and there is no sign of a gradual improvement in women's representation over time.

Special measures — that is, legislative reforms to increase women's political representation — can be controversial developments, but in this context the institution of special measures would be a means to guarantee the presence and the contribution of women in parliamentary politics. Women activists in Tonga have mostly advocated either a reserved seat model or a 'safety net' model of special measures. This In Brief sets out the cases for and against these two models, with examples from the Pacific islands region, and conclude with a brief discussion of the Tongan political context.

The Reserved Seat Model

This involves a certain number of seats in a legislature being set aside for representatives belonging to a certain societal group — in this case, women. Reserved seats ensure an outcome of a minimum number of seats occupied by women. In Bougainville, a reserved seat system was instituted in 2004. Three seats are reserved for women — each representing a region of Bougainville (North, South, and Central) — in addition to three guaranteed seats for ex-combatants, in the 40-seat parliament. The women's seats can only be contested by women, but both women and men can vote for the representatives. The reserved seat system ensures a minimum level of women's representation.

The Bougainville reserved seat system has been criticised by some as acting as a ceiling for women's representation, due to a perception that women cannot or should not be contesting the open seats (see Baker 2014). All women candidates in the 2005 election chose to contest reserved seats instead of open seats, and of the five candidates who contested open seats in the 2010 election, none was successful. In the 2015 election, while one woman, Josephine Getsi, won an open seat — a significant achievement — around two-thirds of women candidates chose to contest the reserved seats, and the majority of women candidates in

the open seats placed last or second to last. This suggests issues of both supply and demand when it comes to increasing women's representation in Bougainville from the current level — women choose to contest reserved seats over open seats, and voters may be unwilling to vote for a women in an open seat because of the misconception that those are 'men's seats'.

The 'Safety Net' Model

An alternative model to reserved seats is the type of special measures recently adopted in Samoa, which will be implemented for the first time in the 2016 general election. The Samoan model can be termed a 'safety net' system; it again provides a guaranteed minimum level of women's political representation, but the legislative measures only come into force if a general election fails to produce the required number of elected women representatives. In the Samoan system, this level is five members of parliament (MPs) (or 10 per cent). If less than five women are elected in a general election, women will take up additional seats in parliament. So, for example, if two women are elected, there will be three additional seats to ensure a minimum of five women members. These additional seats will be taken up by the women who poll the highest, percentage-wise, of the unsuccessful female candidates in the election.

One advantage of a safety net system is that it cannot be said to act as a ceiling on women's representation, as reserved seats systems are criticised as doing. Instead, the special measures are only implemented if the election results show that women's representation falls below a certain threshold. This type of system could potentially increase the number of women candidates, as high-performing women in the election could be eligible for an additional seat even if they didn't win in their constituency. It would also ensure that all women who entered parliament — even those who occupied additional seats — had gone through

the same process of nominating, campaigning, and contesting the election as male MPs.

The question of introducing special measures in the Tongan parliament is not unfamiliar terrain. There are already nine parliamentary reserved seats — for representatives of the nobles. In the current political context, a campaign for special measures for women would take place amid debates on other potential changes to the current political system, in which the question of disestablishment of both the noble's seats and the provisions for cabinet appointments from outside parliament, amongst other considerations, would no doubt arise. Prime Minister Pohiva has publicly expressed his concern about women's under-representation in politics, and so the political climate seems amenable to action on women's representation issues. The challenge for proponents of special measures for women will be reconciling their aims with pro-democracy calls for the removal of the existing special measures for other groups and individuals — the reserved seats for nobles, and the external cabinet appointment system.

Author Notes

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References

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