PRACTICE PARLIAMENT 2014: A NEW ERA FOR THE WOMEN OF TONGA

As part of its vision of building a modern and more representative Parliament for the people of Tonga, the Practice Parliament for Women (PPW) was initiated to encourage women’s participation in Parliament. It was an initiative anticipated to inspire wider participation in the law-making process, and also geared to helping participants understand parliamentary processes. A Parliamentary Research Officer for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that collaborated on the PPW, outlines the objectives that formed the backdrop to the running of an extremely successful programme.

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History of Tongan Women in Parliament
Women in Tonga were first given the right to vote and stand in elections in 1951, but it was only in 1975 that the first female Member of Parliament was elected. In the decades that followed, there has only been a total of seven women that have entered Parliament, three of them by virtue of their appointment as Cabinet Ministers.

At the level of local government, the first woman to be elected as a town officer was in 2004. Since then, only three women have held the same position. These statistics strongly highlight the fact that despite the fact that women comprise half of the country’s population, the percentage of women’s representation at local and national levels of decision making has been minimal.

As a result of the slow progress, the Speaker of Tonga’s Legislative Assembly, Lord Fakafanua, decided that a Practice Parliament for Women (PPW) be held. Its aim was to encourage and promote women’s active participation and involvement in the legislative process. Following in the examples of Practice Parliaments held in neighboring countries such as Kiribati and Solomon Islands, Tonga also initiated its first ever Practice Parliament for Women.

Politics in Tonga
Prior to 2010, Tonga’s Legislative Assembly was comprised of 12 cabinet ministers, two Governors, nine elected nobles’ representatives (elected by 33 of their peers) and nine people’s representatives who were popularly elected by universal suffrage.

In 2010 however, major political reforms occurred with the passage of several historical constitutional amendments. These amendments removed the King’s royal prerogative to appoint the Prime Minister and Ministers of Cabinet and vested that authority in the Members of the Legislative Assembly. It also resulted in a major increase of the number of people’s representatives from nine to 17.

The objectives of this reform sought to reflect Tonga’s commitment to having a more inclusive Parliament and government. This was following the destructive riots that threw the country into chaos in November 2006. Furthermore, these changes meant there was now a better chance for both men and women to become elected Members of Parliament. Despite this new distribution of power in recent years, there is still very little improvement in the advancement of women’s real political representation in Tonga.

Public awareness campaign
The Practice Parliament was a week-
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**Table 1. Progress of women’s representation at Tonga’s Legislature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Establishment of Vava’u Parliamentary Government (Vava’u Code)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1891</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Women allowed to vote and stand as candidates in general elections</td>
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long event that took place from 7 to 11 April 2014 after a culmination of months of planning, organization, and awareness-raising campaigns.

The broad objectives of the Practice Parliament were:

- To encourage the active participation of both genders in Parliament;
- To increase awareness on the importance of women’s role in a participatory democratic system especially in light of recent political reforms;
- To help Tongan women better understand the Legislature’s roles, procedures and processes;
- To empower Tongan women and showcase women’s potential for decision making when put in a near-reality Parliament setting; and
- To inspire women and increase their confidence encouraging them to run as parliamentary candidates in the upcoming general elections in order that they become future leaders and decision makers for the country.

By the end of the month-long public awareness campaign, the Practice Parliament had received extensive coverage throughout Tonga. Based on the issues raised during the live talk shows, it was evident that the public generally understood there was a need for more women representatives and that in order to get them elected; they had to register to vote. A subject of some controversy for the public was the proposal to introduce a quota system to reserve seats in Parliament for Women.
Applications

Through the public forums listed above, women in Tonga were encouraged to apply and were informed that the selection criteria followed closely to that required of candidates in a general election. When the deadline arrived, the Secretariat received 91 applications from different women throughout Tonga.

The selection criteria was carefully tailored to account for factors such as: the applicant’s intention to run for Parliament; current engagement with her community; important issues she wished to raise during the PPW and its relevance to her community; the issue related to existing laws or to make amendments; and how she intended to use the PPW platform to voice those issues.

Most importantly, the Committee also considered whether the applicant had any intention of running in the upcoming November 2014 General Elections.

Twenty-nine women were subsequently selected, and included bankers, businesswomen, lawyers, consultants, environmentalists, teachers, former politicians, public servants, non-governmental organization workers and those who were self-employed – a truly diverse group.

The candidates

The PPW was fashioned to follow the current parliamentary setting of 26 seats. There was an addition of four seats for the non-elected Members, which are traditionally reserved for the Prime Minister’s appointment. For the purposes of the Practice Parliament, those four seats were taken up by two representatives who did apply through the normal method of application and they took up the seats of the two current non-elected Members.

The position of Lord Prime Minister was assigned to the PPW’s Tongatapu Noble’s Representative Number 1 and the Ministers of Cabinet were allocated to the Members who represented the constituencies of the real-life Minister.

Representatives from the outer islands of Tonga were also fortunate to participate, as the outer island constituencies make up for seven of the constituencies of the electoral roll. Loisi Halaliku, a member of the PPW and a board member of the Queen Vanilla Vava’u Association reiterated that the programme empowered her to speak on behalf of the women of her district. She also emphasized that the PPW motivated her to run for and hopefully become the first female district officer in Tonga.

Ms ‘Emeline Fatai Veikoso, who took up the seat of Minister of Education as a non-elected Member,
said that the Practice Parliament was an excellent practice and learning process for her. She felt welcomed in an atmosphere that was accommodating and friendly.

Orientation
An informative two-day orientation programme was held from 7 to 9 April 2014, and was designed to inform and educate the PPW members on the legislative processes and to provide training on the subject matters for the Bills and petitions to be discussed. Leading authorities on subject matters were invited to provide briefings for PPW Members.

This was followed by a rehearsal programme that was held inside Parliament House for the purpose of familiarizing the members with the Legislative Assembly’s Chambers, in order to ensure that they were not daunted by the fact that they had to debate in a formal and often formidable setting.

In opening the Practice Parliament, Tonga’s highest political and traditional leader Her Majesty Queen Nanasipau’u declared that it was an opportunity to “showcase our parliamentary institution, with its aspirations for a more inclusive and democratic government, as well as its respect for… the rights of the marginalized and the minority”.11

Sessions
From 10 to 11 April 2014 the actual sitting sessions commenced at the Legislative Assembly Chambers in Nuku’alofa.

The event was broadcasted and telecasted live on all radio and television networks in Tonga, thereby being the central focus of the entire electorate for those two days, and generating great awareness overseas as the debates were also streamed live via the internet.

An area in Nuku’alofa known as the Civic Square was reserved during the two days of deliberation that projected live television feeds of the PPW to invited high school students, women’s groups, civil society and members of the public who wished to watch the live debates from Parliament. Information booths were also set up with a view to widely disseminating information relating to the issue of women participation in politics.

The Agenda
The PPW Working Committee and Secretariat prepared the agenda according to the common recurring issues raised by the 91 women who had applied.

The agenda encouraged healthy, opinionated debates that showcased the women’s talents, debating skills and their first-hand knowledge of important local and international issues.

The issues discussed included but were not limited to issues such as the controversial topic of Temporary Special Measures, and it also encouraged current and live issues that were of valid concern for the constituencies, such as economic, environment and youth issues.

Bill
A Bill was drafted that sought to amend the Order in Public Places Act authorizing the closing of bakeries and restaurants on Sunday – a response to numerous applications which called to repeal the Act which had effectively allowed bakeries to open during Sundays as a result of emergency situations following a natural disaster that occurred in 1982. There were strong religious-based arguments that the Sabbath should be kept holy – as provided under clause 6 of the constitution.
Motions
The following motions were drafted for discussion:
• A motion to re-introduce the Youth Diversion Scheme;
• A motion to seek government's financial and technical assistance for Women's handicrafts and other works to encourage activities which women are not usually involved in such as fishing and agriculture; and
• A motion to introduce a quota system for reserved seats for Women in Parliament.

Petitions
The two petitions included one calling for government's assistance in building coastal protection measures for Ha'apai and a second that requested the government to find new and improved methods of transportation to and from the remote islands of Niua.

Gabriella 'Ilolahia, a Member of the PPW and notable human rights activist indicated that she immensely enjoyed the live debates, particularly when given the opportunity to make a point of order or to correct the Opposition.

She stated that “…this meant that I was able to ensure that the opposing side’s opinions were confronted. I wanted to ensure that all diverging views would be halted in case everybody would believe them instead of what I wanted them to believe. This to me was and is still exciting because it made me, unconsciously pull out all the information from the back of my mind, which I had gathered over the years….”

There were heated debates over the Temporary Special Measures Motion that would ensure women representation in Parliament through the introduction of a quota system. However, the general consensus was that even though the odds are against all women in Tonga and that there may be discouragements along the way, it was realized that women have an important role to play in Tonga’s development.

The Members agreed that if they remained as spectators, the ideas and the gifts they possess would be wasted and complaining would be pointless given they were not willing to actively work together to make a change.

At the conclusion, the majority of the PPW Members indicated strong support for the establishment of a body to investigate the feasibility of Temporary Special Measures for women in Tonga and they called on the Legislative Assembly of Tonga in consultation with donor partners to take the lead with this initiative.

It was also reassuring to see the confidence and self-assuredness of the women increase or prompted during the week-long event. They argued competently, disagreed professionally and made compromises in matters that they knew would be in the paramount interests of the public.

The Practice Bill, motions and petitions all received passage through the Practice Parliament, but nevertheless were appropriately critiqued, dissected, debated and properly assessed by both Government and the Opposition. Although the outcomes of these motions, petition and the Bill does not become Law, they are a reflection of the important views and thoughts of the women of Tonga, and could be tabled if taken up by a current Member of Parliament.

Outcome
The Practice Parliament was a necessary first step in the right direction that sought to encourage Tongan women and in ensuring that all potential candidates are given the opportunity to become more engaged with Parliament and learn of its functions, roles and processes.
in an empowering and party neutral environment.

Encouragingly, several of the PPW members have indicated that the programme has confirmed their decisions to run in the upcoming elections, no doubt better aware, better informed and much more equipped to compete with the men of Tonga for a seat in the national Legislature.

The UNDP through the Tonga Governance Strengthening Programme, the Civil Society Forum and the Tonga Electoral Commission, have been providing civic education and campaign training for some of the Members who are interested in or have announced their candidacy for the 2014 general elections.

Conclusion

The Practice Parliament was an initiative that hoped to inspire wider participation in the Law making process and its overall success will perhaps be measured by the successful election of women into the Legislative Assembly in November during the upcoming general elections.

The PPW Members anticipated that this was the first of many future Practice Parliaments and have indicated their commitment to ensuring its sustainability. They expressed that the Legislative Assembly of Tonga with the support of development partners would continue to take the lead role in the planning and implementation of future PPWs. The PPW’s outcome statement affirmed that the women believed in an official parliamentary process that would allow women to explore further initiatives to promote gender, youth, culture, economic empowerment, social and disability issues at the national level.

To summarize, the Practice Parliament was a very positive means of starting to initiate the process of breaking down the social and cultural barriers that prevent women from reaching their fullest potential, especially in advancing their representation. In general, most comments on radio talk shows tended to highlight that the PPW has helped propel women into politics and encourage both genders of the electorate to seriously consider women on their merits as promising potential leaders in the future.

It is the quiet hope of those behind the scenes that the PPW has generated widespread energy and ongoing momentum that will encourage women to enter the political arena, which will then achieve the objective of realizing a healthier, more inclusive and gender-balanced political arena....

Endnotes

2. The Basic Tables and Administrative Report Census of Population and Housing 2011 reveals that the total population is as follows: Total population: 103,252. Male: 51,979; Female: 51,273
3. Friendly Islands Human Rights and Democracy Movement of Tonga
4. The Public Awareness campaign and the Practice Parliament was generously funded and aided by various donors and agencies including the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Australian AID, UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA, Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, Legislative Assembly of Tonga, Tonga Electoral Commission and the Civil Society Forum of Tonga.
5. The Secretariat started a community Facebook page for the initiative and was named Practice Parliament for Women in Tonga.
6. A total of 33 meetings were held throughout the 17 constituencies in Tonga where the public were invited to join. The Secretariat had engaged prominent women to speak at each village meeting in order to inspire the participation of the women.
7. The Electoral Act of Tonga provides the grounds which a person must satisfy in order to be eligible to stand as a candidate in the general elections and they are that the person must be a Tongan citizen, over 21 years of age, has not been convicted of an indelible criminal offence and has resided in the constituency from which he will be registering as a candidate for over 3 months.
8. Three former women Parliamentarians successfully applied to join the Practice Parliament. They were (1) Lady ‘Eseta Fusitu’a, who later became the Speaker of the Practice Parliament. She became a Member of Parliament in 2009 when she was appointed as the Minister for Information and Communication (2) Papisia Bloomfield Foliki who became the Minister of Justice during the Practice Parliament. She was the first female commoner to become an elected Member of Parliament in 1981 (3) Lepolo Tausilili was the Chairperson of the Committee of the Whole House. Mrs Tausilili was a People’s Representative from Niua. She was in Parliament for one parliamentary term (2005-2010).
9. Clause 51(2)(a) of the Act of Constitution of Tonga (Amendment) (No.2) Act 2010 provides that the Prime Minister may nominate as Cabinet Ministers not more than 4 persons who are not elected representatives.
10. Currently, the two non-elected members in the 2010-2014 Parliamentary Term are Hon Dc ‘Ana Taufa‘anu‘u (Minister of Education) and Hon. Oli Edwards (Minister of Justice).
11. Her Majesty Queen Nanase’u’auvai in her address during the opening ceremony of the Practice Parliament for Women in Tonga 2014 held at the Farehina Convention Centre in Nuku‘alofa on 7 April 2014.