



FILI FALE ALEA 2010

TONGA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2010

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND ELECTION OBSERVERS

JOINT STATEMENT

Nuku'alofa, 26 November 2010

Election observers from Australia and New Zealand offer our warm congratulations to the people of Tonga, the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga and the Tonga Electoral Commission on the genuine, free and fair elections for the Legislative Assembly on 25 November 2010. All Tongan citizens can have full confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

Candidates included 134 men and 11 women. The meticulous preparation for and conduct of these elections were most impressive. In particular the distribution of voter identification cards provided integrity and simplicity to the process.

These historic elections mark the culmination of commitments by His Majesty King George Tupou V to introduce a more representative system of government. Australia and New Zealand have been pleased to support Tonga's political reforms and are committed to continuing to support this process. Australia and New Zealand were particularly pleased to accept the invitation of the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga to observe these elections.

We appreciate the opportunity to meet in Nuku'alofa, prior to the elections, a range of stakeholders including Prime Minister Dr the Hon Feleti Vaka'uta Sevele, the Tonga Electoral Commission's Chair Mr Barrie Sweetman and Supervisor of Elections Mr Pita Vuki, the Civil Society Forum of Tonga's Chair Mr Drew HAVAea and Executive Director Ms Siale 'Ilolahia, Police Commander Chris Kelley, and the Media Council's Chair Mr Pesi Fonua and Deputy Chair Mr Kalafi Moala. All provided excellent briefings.

Fourteen delegates from Australia and New Zealand, accredited by the Tongan Electoral Commission, observed polling on the islands of Tongatapu, Ha'apai, Vava'u and 'Eua in 70 polling station in 16 of the 17 constituencies. Delegates included current and former Members of Parliament, senior Foreign Affairs and Trade officials, a senior electoral commission official, and other senior government officials.

Our assessment is that the polling process was extremely well conducted and completely transparent. It was administered impartially, with voters able to exercise a free and secret vote. We noted that people could vote in an open and neutral political environment where contending views could be safely expressed in the election campaign.

Our observation of the counting process indicated that it was conducted and tabulated most efficiently, in a careful, accurate and transparent manner.

We were very impressed by the commitment and technical proficiency of all officials and agencies involved in conducting the polling process. Counting and the process of returning ballot boxes under Police supervision went smoothly and in accordance with Tongan law. We encourage the Electoral Commission to continue its highly successful program of training for electoral officers in line with the Polling Station Procedures Handbook provided by the Electoral Commission for these elections.

Observers were also very impressed by the high level of voter awareness and congratulate the Electoral Commission, civil society, churches and the media on their voter awareness programs. Observers noted the efforts made by the stakeholders to ensure, in the words of a famous Tongan proverb, that no hidden reef sinks the canoe (“Koe maka mangalongalo ‘oku fakafoa vaka.”)

Voter registration is mandatory in Tonga; while voting is voluntary. Registered electors were 42,409. Voter turnout at some 90% of registered voters reflected the very strong community interest that we observed in relation to these historic elections.

We commend the Electoral Commission for its recent comprehensive review of the electoral roll which closed on 31 August 2010 and was published in final form on 9 September 2010. We note that the Electoral Commission, Civil Society Forum and the Media Council are confident that the vast majority of eligible voters were registered. The view of those we spoke to was that the new electoral roll is a significant improvement. We endorse suggestions for ongoing work by the Electoral Commission to maintain the currency of that electoral roll for future elections.

On the day prior to polling we inspected a number of polling places. It was evident that election signs and material had been removed in line with electoral law.

A peaceful environment prevailed across the country on polling day. Observers noted that procedures were in place for any complaints about the election process to be lodged and dealt with in accord with Tongan law in an even-handed and transparent way.

We wish to record our appreciation to the people of Tonga for the hospitality which Australian and New Zealand observers encountered everywhere we went. Mālō ‘aupito.

Bob Davis
for Australia

John Hayes
for New Zealand