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Tonga's state of emergency
Interview with Akilisi Pohiva, Tongan Parliamentarian

The Pacific kingdom of Tonga has been under a state of emergency since riots last November, which destroyed most of the central business district of the capital, Nuku'alofa.

The riots followed a campaign for political reform in a country where only nine of the 30 members of Parliament are elected by the people.

As the month-by-month extensions of the state of emergency continue, Tonga's pro-democracy movement is warning there's mounting anger.

Pro-democracy leader Akilisi Pohiva has been a member of the Tongan parliament for 18 years, regularly scoring more votes than anybody else in the kingdom's elections.

One of several commoner members of Parliament facing charges of sedition, he spoke with **Helen Vatsikopoulos** about the effects martial law are having on the population.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: Akilisi Pohiva, welcome to the program.

Akilisi Pohiva, Tongan Parliamentarian: Yes.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: What impact has the state of emergency and the curbs on freedoms had on the people of Tonga?

Akilisi Pohiva: I feel that the majority of the people really want government to lift the emergency law. Up to now, we still don't have access to radio and television. But at this point of time, we, representatives of the people, really want to go out to the people and talk to them, have meeting with them because the Parliament is going, will be officially opened on the first week of June. So, we have quite a lot of work to do with the people.

Now, we feel that our constitutional right is severely affected by the continuous extension of the martial law. If they continue on, they have to come out with a clear direction of what is going to happen. What time, or the time frame, when they are going to stop. At this point of time, I'm very worried because some people are angry.

'We feel that our constitutional right is severely affected by the continuous extension of the martial law.'

Helen Vatsikopoulos: The government would say it's playing it safe. There were young Tongan men, repatriated from overseas countries after causing trouble there, that actually turned the demonstrations in November into the riots. They are the people they're worried about.

Akilisi Pohiva: Those few people who were sent back from, mostly from America, I've talked to some of them. They have gone back to normal. But the continuous extension of the emergency law would make them angry. Government can't afford to allow the people to continue to live in a grey area of doubt and confusion.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: Now, Parliament is supposed to be meeting again in June. What's on the agenda for the political reform process? And are you satisfied it's moving in the right direction?

Akilisi Pohiva: Well, we ended up last year with an agreement signed by the prime minister in the presence of all parties in Cabinet Room on the People's Committee for Political Reform proposal and this is what we expect government to do in the next session of Parliament. We expect government to honour that agreement. If not, then we will continue to have a lot of work to do.

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Helen Vatsikopoulos: This king has demonstrated his reformist credentials. He says he wants to divest himself of the economic dominance that he and the other nobles have over the Tongan economy. Now, do you have faith in him?

Akilisi Pohiva: He said that he already gave up his, all his business interest. But we still don't know whether he's still there or he already gave up all his business connection and business activities.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: Well, it's going to take a lot of money to rebuild the capital, 80 per cent of which was destroyed last November. The prime minister is said to be negotiating to borrow money from China. He's just been on a visit there. Is that a good move?

Akilisi Pohiva: The purpose of the visit was to borrow money, 100 millions pa'anga from the Bank of China. Now, I'm concerned because people's representatives should have been involved in the discussion of that loan. For him to borrow money from China is making people of Tonga and all representatives of the people feel uncomfortable.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: Why are you concerned that Tonga might become dependent on China?

Akilisi Pohiva: See, at present we have quite a number of Chinese people in Tonga. And what is happening now, they are very powerful in business and so far they have, they are now beginning to dominate the small retail stores, which is, which make our local people feel very, very insecure.

'In the case of China, nobody knows. I think they will get more benefit from us rather than what we will get from them.

The other thing is, we still want to keep our relationship with New Zealand, Australia, the United States, because more than half of our people are living in those countries. And at present we are relying on remittances from those countries. Seventy per cent to 80 per cent of our national income comes from New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

In the case of China, nobody knows. I think they will get more benefit from us rather than what we will get from them, because they will not accept any Tongans to come and live in China.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: And are your neighbours, Australia and New Zealand, doing enough for Tonga now? What you like to see them do?

Akilisi Pohiva: Australia and New Zealand should understand that once they contributed towards the work of the National Committee for Political Reform, they had become a part of the process. Since November 16th, up 'til now, they seemed to keep quiet and sit on the fence. New Zealand and Australia have nothing to lose. They have to come out and be involved in the discussion, be involved in the process.

Helen Vatsikopoulos: Akilisi Pohiva, thank you.

Akilisi Pohiva: Thank you.