

## NIUE

The major event of 1989–90 for Niue was Cyclone Ofa, which caused severe damage during 3–4 February 1990. Despite protection from its reef and hundred-foot-high cliffs, enormous waves crashed boulders and tons of water onto the island, wrecking buildings and equipment. For Niue's fragile economy, already disturbed by the loss in 1988 of its international air service, this cyclone may prove to be one storm too many.

Hardest hit was the capital, Alofi, where most government offices, public services, and expatriate housing are situated. Structures on the seaward side of the main road suffered the most. The desirable cliff-top home of then cabinet minister Robert Rex, Jr—the son of Premier Sir Robert Rex—was swept into the sea in a matter of minutes. The residence of the Speaker of the Niue Assembly, Sam Tagelagi, was virtually destroyed. The government-owned Niue Hotel, the principal such amenity on the island, was devastated, while the island's hospital was extensively damaged and initially had to be evacuated. Total storm damage was assessed at more than US\$2.5 million, but further costs must include the impact of the cyclone on the island's diminishing attractiveness to its own people.

Niue's population has declined in twenty years by more than half, to approximately 2200 in 1990. With more than 12,000 people of Niuean descent now living in New Zealand, this dramatic population decline has become a source of concern not only on Niue but to New Zealand, which

has a constitutional commitment to provide financial support for the island.

The Niue Concerted Action Plan 1988–90, which was designed to stabilize population numbers, is being reassessed in the wake of Cyclone Ofa. Damage to infrastructure disrupted fishing activities in several villages, but the storm's effects on agriculture were more serious. Breadfruit, banana, papaya, and taro crops were devastated, leaving a relatively small quantity of local food on an island once entirely self-sufficient in this respect. Royal New Zealand Air Force flights brought in emergency medical supplies, generators, water and fuel pumps, and food. A New Zealand navy vessel, *Endeavour*, delivered additional foodstuffs, as well as building and plumbing materials, two weeks after the storm.

Cyclone Ofa also had an impact on the political environment. The general election was held as scheduled on 7 April, only two months after the cyclone. Sir Robert Rex, aged 81 and premier since self-government in 1974, had begun to face increasing opposition during 1989, surviving a no-confidence motion moved by opposition leader (and former South Pacific Commission secretary-general) Young Vivian in June. The vote arose after a New Zealand Audit Department statement expressed concern about Niue's spending of NZ\$10 million in aid monies from New Zealand. Despite speculation about his possible retirement, the premier linked his decision to run for office to the cyclone: "I'll have to stand again now, despite pressure from my family to stand down. It would be like a captain deserting a sinking ship"

(*PIM*, March 1990, 15). Nevertheless, the election results suggested a mixed response amongst Niueans to their premier's sense of commitment and tenacity.

Sir Robert stood against two challengers for reelection as the representative for Alofi South. He gained 71, or less than half, of the 152 valid votes cast, but this was enough to win reelection by 9 votes over the runner-up. He owed his victory to a divided opposition and was the only candidate returned with less than a majority. On 12 April, the Niue Assembly reelected Sir Robert to his sixth successive term as premier by a vote of 12 to 8. Sam Tegelagi was reelected speaker by the same margin, a reflection of the party alignments that have developed recently among the diminishing population of Niue.

Given Sir Robert's longevity in politics, his "faction" may be described as the Niuean political "establishment." Also contesting the 1990 elections were Young Vivian's Action Party, and Sani Lakatani's Niue People's Action Party (NPAP). Shortly before the elections, these two opposition groups joined forces with the sole aim of changing the government.

The most notable aspect of NPAP's manifesto was a pledge to reduce Niue's public service from its present level (around 600) to "a maximum of 100-150 personnel," an ambitious restructuring favored by New Zealand. The program was vague in other respects, giving no details of how the proposed "repatriation plan" for Niueans might be effected, for example.

Young Vivian's plans included im-

plementing major constitutional changes intended to upgrade Niue's political status. The Niue Constitution Amendment Bill, which reflected the recommendations of a constitutional review committee, had been withdrawn in November 1989 ostensibly "for procedural reasons," and the referendum proposed for January 1990 did not eventuate. Vivian's faction mounted an "It's time to change" campaign, and seemed set to capitalize on a variety of favorable circumstances, including Sir Robert's age and Niue's economic difficulties. But the election results were disappointing, with opposition groups commanding eight votes in the assembly, just one more than they had managed at the time of the vote of no-confidence in June 1989.

Some 94 percent of the 1157 people eligible to vote did so. Each of fourteen villages is represented by one member, with a further six elected on an at-large basis using an island-wide electoral roll. However, the different villages have been affected unequally by emigration, so that now Alofi South's 156 voters and Toi's 22 each send one member to the assembly. In April 1990 it was possible to be one of the highest polling candidates overall but still lose, as did Tukala Makamau Hekau in Alofi South. On the other hand, one candidate was elected with a mere 14 votes. In three villages, no elections were held; as only one candidate had been nominated, their three members (among them Young Vivian) were declared elected prior to the election.

By contrast, nineteen candidates stood for the six common roll seats, including Lady Tagaloa Rex (Sir Robert's wife) and Robert Rex, Jr (his

son), both of them incumbents. Lady Rex gained 483 votes, sufficient to retain her seat and finish third in the balloting, but a decline of 10 percent from her top-polling victory of 1987. Robert Rex, Jr received 396 votes to take fourth position, 13 votes more than the NPAP's Sani Lakatani. Leading the field was O'love Tauveve Jacobsen, a nurse first elected at a November 1988 by-election, and regarded as politically independent of the various factions.

Initially Sir Robert Rex's survival as premier seemed in doubt, but he broadened his support by including one of the opposition factions in his four-member cabinet. Only one cabinet member, Frank Lui, was reappointed—Robert Rex, Jr lost his ministerial position as well as his house—while NPAP leader and first-time member Sani Lakatani became minister of finance. Following the political reshuffling, however, the principal challenges to the Niue government remain substantially unchanged.

Prospects continue to depend on constructive collaboration with New Zealand—whose aid package now represents roughly NZ\$5000 per Niuean resident—and mobilizing what remains of the island's economy. Efforts to reintroduce a sophisticated air service have led to plans to upgrade the island's airport. Air New Zealand has concluded that a Niue stopover would be uneconomic, and prospects for renewed air links appear to rest with one of the smaller regional carriers.

In mid-1989 the New Zealand minister of external relations and trade suggested not only that the public service might be reduced by two-thirds, but

that Niueans begin to pay for government services. However, this raises the possibility that Niueans removed from the public service (the island's largest employer) or adversely affected by market-led policies might simply emigrate. On the other hand, the April 1990 decision to pay 50 percent of New Zealand superannuation benefits to persons living outside New Zealand for six months or longer may encourage eligible Niueans to return to Niue. Other developments foreshadowed by the Niue Concerted Action Plan, such as a land-title review, were being expedited where possible.

STEPHEN LEVINE

## TOKELAU

Cyclone Ofa of February 1990 was the most important event for Tokelau during the period under review. Following Cyclone Tusi (and a tsunami a fortnight later) in 1987, the vulnerability of the low-lying atoll environment has been demonstrated in the strongest possible manner. Without substantial external assistance it may be years before the villages can recover to their pre-cyclone state, while outer islets will probably never return to their former condition.

No feature of organized life on the islands was unaffected. Twenty-two houses were completely destroyed, and a further ninety-one were severely damaged. Vital seawalls, protecting the fragile Tokelauan land base from erosion, were washed away. Fishing equipment, water tanks, sea latrines, and cooking houses were lost, and food supplies decimated. About 80 per-