Does Tonga have a long parliamentary history?

The formal Legislative Assembly of Tonga is rooted in nearly a century-and-a-half of parliamentary representation and political stability dating back to King George Tupou I, who promulgated Tonga's 1875 Constitution. Since that time, the structure of the Tongan Parliament has changed and adapted over time.

What is the current composition of the Parliament of Tonga?

Most recently, Tonga fundamentally changed its system of governance in 2010. It is now a unicameral parliamentary democracy consisting of a House with 26 seats. Seventeen seats are held for People’s Representatives (PRs) elected on a constituency basis by the general population (there are ten constituencies on the main island of Tongatapu, three in Vava’u, two in Ha’apai, one in ‘Eua, and one in Niuas). The remaining nine seats are held by Nobles elected by and from the thirty-three traditional heads of Tonga’s extended Kaingas. Together the 26 are referred to as Members of Parliament (MPs). Very roughly, it is similar to combining the British House of Commons and House of Lords into one House.

How is the Executive chosen?

There are general elections every four years from which Parliament elects a Prime Minister (PM) from within its members to lead the executive branch of government. The House elects the Prime Minister in a special meeting of elected representatives chaired by an Interim Speaker following the general election. There are no political parties and any Member of Parliament can become Prime Minister if they have the backing of the House. The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet, which is made up of a maximum of 12 Members of Parliament, including the PM. If the PM deems it necessary due to lack of specific expertise in the House, the PM can invite up to four outside experts to join Cabinet. Those asked to join from outside have all the voting rights of regular MPs except for voting in a Vote of No Confidence (VoNC) motion.

What is a Vote of No Confidence?

It is a motion moved in Parliament that allows Members of Parliament to vote on if they still have confidence in the Prime Minister to lead the Executive Branch of Government. If, after a due process, a majority of the House votes that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister to lead the Executive, the House can then choose a new Prime Minister who can then chose a new Cabinet.

Has there been a Vote of No Confidence in Tonga before?

Under the new political structures introduced in 2010, a motion for a VoNC is only allowed to be tabled after the first eighteen months of a general election, and before the last six months leading to the next general election.

The first motion for a Vote of No Confidence in Tongan history was tabled in June 2012 when long time activist People’s Representative (PR) Samuela ‘Akilisi Pohiva and his supporters
tabled a Vote of No Confidence against then Prime Minister Lord Tu’ivakano and his government.

The motion effectively paralyzed the government for almost four months, as Parliament struggled with the new structures introduced during the 2010 political reforms. The uncertainty brought much of government business to a halt, as Ministers and civil servants awaited a decision. Various MPs prolonged the debate and proceedings with volumes of documentation tabled for or against the motion. While official parliamentary proceedings seemed deadlocked, political horse-trading took place behind the scenes. The unrelated unseating of the Speaker of Parliament and the subsequent election of a new Speaker further exacerbated the lengthy process. In October 2012, the vote was finally carried 13-11 in favour of the incumbent Prime Minister Lord Tu’ivakano.

Did the 2012 Vote of No Confidence result in any tangible change?

Parliament’s 2012 experience with the VoNC, and the resulting several months lost, revealed structural issues with the 2010 political reforms. On the 27th of October 2016, the Speaker of Parliament approved amendments to the Rules of Procedure for Parliament that included new rules for all future VoNCs. Most noticeable is the addition of Rule 84C that requires every motion for a VoNC tabled in the house to be signed by at least ten MPs. Rule 84G (1) also stipulates the motion be put to a vote within five working days from the time it is tabled.

What is the importance of the 20th of February 2017 Vote of No Confidence?

On the 29th of December 2014, following a general election, Samuela ‘Akilisi Pohiva, PR of Tongatapu 1 constituency, won a 15-11 vote against his rival nominee, the outgoing Deputy Prime Minister Samiu Vaipulu and became the second Prime Minister of the post-2010 reforms. Prime Minister Pohiva appointed a Noble’s Representative and ten PRs to Ministerial Cabinet positions.

On the 20th of February 2017, a motion for a VoNC in Prime Minister Pohiva was tabled in Parliament. According to the new Rules of Procedure, the House will have up to five working days to ballot the motion. In effect, this motion is not limited to challenging Prime Minister Pohiva’s leadership but his whole government’s performance over the past two years.

This is the first motion for a VoNC in the 2014-2018 term and is, as the new rules require, supported and signed by 10 MPs. A simple majority is required to carry the motion and a successful VoNC in the Prime Minister not only resigns the Prime Minister from his post but also all of the Cabinet Ministers.

The House will then vote on a new Prime Minister, who will chose a new Cabinet (some of the members of the old Cabinet may again be chosen to serve). The result would be a change of Executive without a new general election. However, if the House fails to appoint a new PM within 48 hours of a successful VoNC motion, the King must dissolve the House and order a new general election to take place within the following 90 days.

Is a change of Executive leadership between general elections a sign of instability in a parliamentary democracy?

It is not uncommon or necessarily a sign of instability for there to be a change of Executive between general elections in parliamentary democracies caused by a VoNC or for other reasons. Australia had several such changes in the last five years and the United Kingdom had one such change under a year ago. The VoNC provision is a normal part of the parliamentary democracy process.

The Royal Oceania Institute (ROI) is a new, independent, Tongan think tank. The ROI’s goals are to support and pursue Pacific-centered, ethical, fact-based research and analysis. It also facilitates open dialogue on topics relevant to community, sustainable development, and regional relations. The ROI grew out of an identifiable need for a non-partisan, permanent, accessible and reputable platform for building confidence and cooperation, and encouraging broad information sharing and understanding.

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF TONGA DIAGRAM
As of Monday, 20 February 2017
Parliamentary Term: 2014 - 2018

The above diagram is a representation of the seat allocation in the Legislative Assembly of Tonga prepared by the Royal Oceania Institute.
February 2017