

Tonga announces the expulsion of hundreds of Chinese immigrants

By John Braddock
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The tiny Pacific kingdom of Tonga began moves last month to expel hundreds of its Chinese residents who are victims of a recent wave of ethnic violence. More than 600 Chinese storekeepers and their families are being given a year to leave once their work permits expire.

Police in the capital, Nuku'alofa, say there have been about 100 cases of assault, armed robbery, burglary and arson of Chinese-owned shops involving Tongans. The Chinese Embassy in Tonga has expressed concern about the level of violence against its nationals.

Chinese residents make up about 3,000 to 4,000 of Tonga's population of 100,000. Fewer than 1,000 are shopkeepers. Nevertheless, the chief immigration officer, Susana Fotu, claims that the expulsions are in response to "widespread anger at the growing presence of the storekeepers" and the fear that the Chinese will come to dominate the economy.

According to the *New Zealand Herald* newspaper, the victimisation of Chinese is linked to a struggle for succession within Tonga's royal family. The 83-year-old king Taufa'ahau Tupou IV has been ill for some time. His youngest son, Prime Minister Prince 'Ulakalala Lavaka Ata, is said to be vying with his sister, Princess Pilolevu Tuita, for control. Royal succession has become an issue as the king's eldest son has indicated he does not wish to inherit the throne.

Tonga's royal family, established in the 19th century under the tutelage of British Methodist missionaries, wields almost absolute power. The king appoints both the prime minister and deputy prime minister for life, as well as the entire cabinet, the Privy Council and the Supreme Court. The legislative assembly or Fale Alea has 30 seats. Twelve are reserved for the appointed cabinet ministers, nine are selected by the country's 33 "nobles" or chiefs, and only nine are elected by

popular vote.

The princess, who has extensive business interests in China, is understood to support Chinese immigration to stimulate the economy—a policy promoted by her father. An influx of Chinese took place from the mid-1990s on work permits issued with the royal seal. Many found jobs as construction labourers.

When anti-Chinese crimes first occurred in 1999, the police blamed a small group of "anti-social" elements. A petition submitted to the parliament calling for the repatriation of Chinese immigrants gathered only 47 signatures. At the time, the Prime Minister appealed for an end to the victimisations, warning that Tonga would lose its appeal as a tourist destination.

Now, in a crude appeal to Tongan nationalism, prince-cum-Prime Minister 'Ulakalala has changed tack and ordered the expulsions. While the immediate target appears to be his sister, the decision reflects wider divisions in the country's tiny ruling elite arising from recent attempts to open up the island's fragile economy to overseas investment, particularly from China.

After a series of high level political and trade delegations from China, a bilateral deal covering agriculture, fisheries and manufacturing was signed in Beijing in 1999. In order to facilitate the deal, Tonga severed its previous diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Princess Pilolevu has been one of the main beneficiaries of the closer ties. A decade ago, Tonga provoked international concern by claiming more geostationary satellite slots than necessary for its own communications needs. Princess Pilolevu then turned the government entitlement into her own private satellite communications business, Tongasat.

The 50-year-old princess' daughter runs Tongasat from Hong Kong. It provides the Tongan government

with only a limited, and undisclosed, share of its earnings. The company recently bought its own satellite for the purpose of expanding commercial communications for ships and aircraft. The princess boasted that her business had moved to a “whole new dimension” beyond leasing orbital slots. “We are owner-operators of satellites now,” she crowed.

However, criticisms have been levelled at Princess Pilolevu for refusing to reveal the value of her satellite business. While the princess and a small layer of businessmen have benefitted from Chinese investment, other layers of the “royalty” and “nobles” have gained little or nothing. As the Tongan economy was affected by the downturn in Asia and internationally, a section of the village-based elites began to whip up anti-Chinese chauvinism in a bid to shore up their own interests and divert growing discontent over deteriorating living standards.

As in most Pacific nations, poverty is widespread in Tonga with ordinary households depending largely on money remitted from expatriate islanders living overseas. Tourism provides the only other significant source of hard currency. Unemployment is well into double figures. Only about a quarter of the 2,000 young people who leave school each year are able to find jobs without moving to New Zealand or elsewhere.

Prince ‘Ulakalala has sought to exploit the growing social unease by invoking the politics of “indigenous rights” and using “Chinese storekeepers” as scapegoats for his government’s failure to alleviate the growing social crisis. Apologists for his mass expulsion order justify it by pointing approvingly to Fiji where a racially based regime has been installed following last year’s coup.

News of Tonga’s decision to expel Chinese immigrants provoked a sharp reaction in the *New Zealand Herald*, which declared that Tonga risked becoming an “international outcast”. An editorial in the same newspaper warned that international “financial support”, including investment in tourism, would dry up unless Tonga acted to address its “dodgy reputation”. The *Herald* listed a series of demands including tax reform and the fixing of the country’s “shambolic” migration policies.

The comments reflect concerns in New Zealand’s ruling circles that the move against Chinese immigrants and the reassertion of “indigenous rights” will act as a

barrier to foreign investment and thus its own economic interests in Tonga and other Pacific island states.

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