

Tongan government threatens to block access to Facebook

By Tom Peters
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The government of Tonga, an impoverished Pacific archipelago with 110,000 inhabitants, is threatening to block all access to Facebook.

The news website *Kaniva Tonga* reported on August 10 that Prime Minister ‘Akilisi Pʻhiva’s government was considering a “temporary” ban after anonymous Facebook users made “vicious allegations of a sexual nature” against King Tupou VI and his daughter Princess Angelika. The statements appeared in the Facebook group Mo’oni mo Totonu (Truth and Right).

Pohiva said a working group was looking into different options and a decision would likely be announced before the end of August. Nothing has yet been confirmed. Facebook officials have made no public statement on this extraordinary, anti-democratic threat.

The aim of such a ban would be to suppress freedom of speech and preempt the anti-government opposition by workers, farmers and young people. There is rising anger over social inequality and the role of the royal family and nobility, who largely control the country’s political system.

Only 17 members of the 26-seat parliament are democratically elected, with the remaining nine chosen by the nobility. The King also controls a Privy Council with powers to veto legislation.

Popular anger towards the royals reportedly flared on social media after the government dropped proposed constitutional reforms. Six pieces of legislation proposed in March would have given the government the power to appoint judges, the police commissioner and the attorney general, who are currently appointed by the Privy Council. The legislation has apparently been withdrawn by Pʻhiva’s Democratic Party of the Friendly Islands (DPFI) government after the monarchy and its supporters mobilised against it.

The monarchical system is backed by the churches, business interests, and the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, which have great influence over many aspects of the country’s police and judicial system. Neither Wellington nor Canberra has made any statement opposing a ban on Facebook, which is used by tens of thousands of Tongans to share news and communicate with each other.

The Tongan Chamber of Commerce has expressed concern, given the large number of businesses who use Facebook for advertising.

Pohiva has been falsely promoted for years as a champion of democracy, including by the New Zealand and Australian media. However, since being elected first in 2014 then in 2017, his government has enforced the monarchy’s continued domination over political life, while doing nothing to address worsening social inequality.

The royal family and nobility live in luxury while the vast majority of the population is mired in poverty. Youth unemployment is estimated around 40 percent in rural areas and most families rely on subsistence agriculture. Wages are extremely low, while prices for imported goods are high. *Matangi Tonga* recently reported that a labourer earns just 20.97 pa’anga per day, about US\$9.00. Remittances from Tongans living overseas account for 35 percent of gross domestic product, making Tonga extremely vulnerable to global economic downturns and anti-immigrant policies.

Social problems include an explosion in methamphetamine use, particularly among young people. Police reported that more than 260 people were awaiting trial on drugs charges in July, and 28 police officers had been dismissed for involvement in the drugs trade.

The government has responded to the social crisis

with undisguised contempt. In June, Pohiva lashed out after questioned about assistance for the poor and unemployed. The Tonga Broadcasting Commission reported he told parliament “the main cause of hardship in Tonga includes slothfulness and dependent lifestyles.”

Journalist Kalafi Moala wrote on August 22 that Pohiva faced criticism for feigning sympathy for climate change victims at the recent Pacific Islands Forum, while ignoring Tongans affected by the February 2018 Cyclone Gita. More than a year later, “damage to school buildings all over the island kingdom has still not been fully repaired.” Some classes are being held in unsanitary conditions in tents, leading to the spread of disease.

The entire ruling elite is supporting the crackdown on Facebook because it fears its austerity policies will lead to an explosion of popular unrest, as is happening internationally. The past year-and-a-half has seen mass protests and struggles of the working class in France, Algeria, Sudan, Puerto Rico and Hong Kong. Last year, Papua New Guinea’s government considered banning Facebook following mass protests against corruption, social inequality and police brutality.

Internationally, under the fraudulent pretext of fighting “fake news,” Facebook has engaged in censorship on behalf of governments. The corporation has deleted groups exposing police brutality in the United States and has buried links to left-wing and anti-war publications, including the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Radio NZ reported on August 18 that Tongan Attorney General Linda Folaumoetu’i said some Facebook comments attacking the royal family could amount to “defamation or sedition or treason.” But she added that police feared that making arrests could “create security issues,” adding: “there’s a lot of tension between pro-democracy people, groups, and those who support the king.”

“[Pohiva] told Tonga Television he believed if nothing was done [about Facebook] there could be unrest in the country,” *Kaniva Tonga* reported.

In 2006 pro-democracy riots destroyed several buildings in the capital Nuku’alofa. Australia and New Zealand dispatched soldiers to restore “order” and protect business interests. In an attempt to ease tensions, the monarchy allowed an increase in the

number of democratically-elected members of parliament in the 2010 election from nine to 17.

Australia and New Zealand consider Tonga part of their neo-colonial backyard. They are undoubtedly watching the growing political instability with concern and preparing for another military intervention in the event of mass protests. Both governments are seeking to assert their interests in opposition to growing Chinese investment, loans and donations in the Pacific, including Tonga, where multi-million-dollar loans were made to rebuild following Cyclone Gita.

Last year, Tonga’s police commissioner Stephen Caldwell—a New Zealander whose position is paid for by the New Zealand government—ordered the arrest of former Prime Minister Lord Tu’ivakano in connection with a passport fraud scandal. Tu’ivakano had played a significant role in strengthening ties with China, including the signing of a strategic partnership in 2014 that paved the way for infrastructure investments and loans from Beijing.

Since 2012, New Zealand has hosted Tongan soldiers as part of its biennial military exercises, called Southern Katipo. The war games are explicitly aimed at preparing to invade a Pacific island country and suppress protests and insurgents. New Zealand Special Air Service (SAS) commandos have also joined military exercises in Tonga.

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