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COMMENT

Tomorrow's Woman?

CERIDWEN SPARK, JACK CORBETT, AND PEGGY FAIRBAIRN-DUNLOP

ABSTRACT

The election of Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa as the first female prime minister of Sāmoa has been widely heralded as a critical juncture, especially for women, that will change the nature of Sāmoan politics. In this Comment piece we endorse the observation that Fiamē’s success is remarkable and her election as prime minister significant. But we also caution against the somewhat idealistic and naïve assumption that her prime ministership will be a radical break from the past. Fiamē is well suited to the role because she has three decades of experience as a member of the former governing party in which she rose to the rank of deputy prime minister. She only broke ranks in opposition to reforms that she felt were a significant threat to the rule of law and to fa‘aSamoa cultural beliefs and traditions. If she is a success as prime minister, it will be because her status, profile and highly tuned political instincts embody and balance both continuity and change.

Key words: Sāmoa, female politicians, Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa

Writing on 28 June 2021, historian Patricia O’Brien discusses the likelihood that Fiamē Mata‘afa will soon be taking her elected place as Sāmoa’s prime minister. Describing the outgoing Prime Minister Tuila‘epa Sa‘ilele Malielegaoi as ‘erratic’ and engaged in ‘a power play’, she depicts Fiamē in contrast as ‘unflappable’.¹ While O’Brien’s choice of adjectives reverses the usual characterization of gendered norms in politics, it is not the only notable

description in the article. She concludes: 'It remains to be seen whether a political leader who embodies tomorrow's woman has finally made Tuila'epa yesterday's man'.

The idea that Fiamē is 'tomorrow's woman' is not new but, rather, can be identified in the international media's coverage of the drama that has unfolded since the Sāmoan national election in April. For instance, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said it 'feels significant' for the region² that the new prime minister is a woman. According to the BBC reportage, Fiamē's 'election campaign brought a completely new dynamic to Sāmoan politics',³ and a press release issued by the Fiji Women's Rights Forum describes Fiamē as 'a fierce defender of the parliamentary gender quota that assures more women [sic] representation in the Sāmoan Parliament'.⁴

The significance of Sāmoa electing its first female prime minister cannot be understated. But at the same time the belief among some in the commentariat that Fiamē's election represents an absolute break with the past feels at best to misunderstand her path to power, and at worst overdrawn. Placing unrealistic expectations on Fiamē's shoulders, it suggests that anything less than radical change is likely to be considered a failure. If that is the case, then Fiamē's prime ministership is destined to disappoint. But this need not be so if one begins with a more nuanced understanding of what makes Fiamē so suitable for the job in the first place. If Fiamē turns out to be a successful prime minister of Sāmoa it will likely be because she is able to ensure continuity while embodying change.

Fiamē's father was Sāmoa's first prime minister. When he died in office, she had to compete with other family members to assume the Fiamē title. This was a highly contentious process that was ultimately resolved by the Lands and Titles Court. One judge in the case declared Fiamē an inappropriate candidate for such a high-ranking title because '*She is only 20 years old, she seems overly influenced by her mother, she is female and she is unmarried*'.⁵ Such

objections seem to conjure the spectre of an ‘unruly feminine’ character, one deeply antithetical to the male-dominated world of politics. They also appear to support the perception that from the beginning she was ‘tomorrow’s woman’ and that on becoming prime minister these forward-thinking aspects of her character would reveal themselves in full. Maybe so. But to take that view would mean ignoring all that has happened in the intervening decades, including a record of service that underscores why so many MPs and voters trust her as prime minister in the first place.

While the judge’s verdict rankled, Fiamē took the lesson to heart. She returned from university in Wellington, New Zealand, to her village of Lotofaga. Here she spent the next few years refining the ideals and daily life practices of being a *matai*, one of the *tamaaiga*, and assuming the responsibilities associated with representing her constituency in the national political arena. She first ran for parliament in 1985 at the age of 27 and won. This was a remarkable achievement but one that, given the country operated a *matai* franchise, was contingent on her traditional status. Thus, from the start of her political career Fiamē represented both continuity – she was the daughter of the first prime minister – and change, because she was able to use her status to transcend many of the constraints of conventional gender roles. This is consistent with our finding⁶ that for many of those who live in Fiamē’s constituency, the gender of their new prime minister is far less relevant than the fact that she is Fiamē, and respected as a high-ranking *matai* in her village, nationally and also in the Sāmoan diaspora. This finding is confirmed by Malama Meleisea and co-authors⁷ who discuss the number of women elected in the 2006 election. They suggest that the sex of the three women who were elected in 2006, one of whom was Fiamē, ‘was of minor relevance to their electoral success, since they were evidently chosen on the basis of electoral recognition of their important connections, personal and family standing, and record of service’.⁸ In other

words, it is these other factors – reinforced in Fiamē’s case by her high-ranking title – that underpin her electoral success in her constituency.

As a politician, Fiamē joined the HRPP and for much of her early career worked closely with Tuila‘epa, who was then Minister of Finance, on the VAGST, that is, the value-added goods and services tax. She became a cabinet minister after the 1992 election and was a steady presence in successive HRPP governments thenceforth, becoming deputy prime minister in 2016. Over her many years in politics several new and ostensibly more progressive parties have come and gone (for example, the Samoan National Development Party). Criticisms were levelled at the way the HRPP practised politics.⁹ But despite occasional disagreements with the leadership, especially over the conduct of some MPs and fellow ministers, Fiamē was a loyal HRPP member for three decades. This should not be dismissed. What drove Fiamē away from the HRPP was the decision to push through legislation that seriously curtailed the autonomy, legitimacy and processes of the Lands and Titles Court, as set in the constitution.¹⁰ Viewing the changes as unconstitutional, Fiamē considered them a significant threat to the fa‘aSamoa cultural beliefs and traditions. Her leaving the HRPP and subsequent candidacy must therefore be understood as representing the continuation of that tradition, which her title embodies, into the future.

The other aspect of Fiamē’s ascension to the prime ministership, overlooked in much of the commentary that represents her as a reforming feminist, is the name of the party she leads: Fa‘atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (Faith in the One God of Samoa). We make no comment here on Fiamē’s personal faith. What we do know is that she is a deacon in her local church and a regular attendee. Sāmoa is a country in which the majority of the population identify as Christian, and gender roles in particular are heavily influenced by church teachings. In such a context Fiamē has shown that it is possible for some women – especially one who is so

visible and with a distinguished political career and a high title – to transcend gendered expectations and norms. It is also true that these norms are dynamic and shift from generation to generation.

Yet, as prime minister, Fiamē could not radically alter social expectations around gender even if she wanted to. Rather, as is evident in her long-standing support, as a politician, for women's issues and more recently gender quotas, her advocacy will be more subtle; nudging change along but never so quickly that it will dramatically threaten the status quo.

Fiamē once said that a good Sāmoan *matai* was the ultimate feminist. The reason, she argued, was:

because he's looking after his family and he's making sure people reach their potential, people are engaged. When I see a really good matai in action, and he utilizes all the human resources at his fingertips, which include the women, then you can say he's a great feminist.¹¹

We predict that as prime minister Fiamē will embody this inclusiveness, initiating policies that utilise all of the resources at her disposal in keeping with her largely traditionalist understanding of what being a Sāmoan *matai* can and should entail. She has spent more than 30 years in politics doing just this. Fiamē's success is remarkable and her election as prime minister significant. Not because she is 'tomorrow's woman' and Tuila'epa 'yesterday's man' but, rather, because her profile and highly tuned political instincts embody and balance both continuity and change.

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5 Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Sāmoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Sāmoa* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1987), 195 (italics in original).

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7 Leasiolagi Malama Meleisea, Measina Meredith, Muagututi'a Ioana Chan Mow, Penelope Schoeffel, Semau Ausage Lauano, Hobert Sasa, Ramona Boodoosingh, and Mohammed Sahib, *Political Representation and Women's Empowerment in Samoa: Volume 1: Findings and Recommendations* (Apia, Sāmoa: Centre for Sāmoan Studies, National University of Samoa, 2015), 16.

8 Ibid., 18.

9 See, for example, Iati Iati, 'Samoa's Price for 25 Years of Political Stability', *JPH* 48, no. 4 (2013): 443–63.

10 See Va'ai Saleimoa, *Samoa Faamatai and the Rule of Law* (Sāmoa: National University of Samoa, 1999).

11 Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, interview by Ian Johnstone, Radio New Zealand International, 1 Nov. 2011, [https:// www.rnz.co.nz/collections/u/new-flags-flying/nff-women/naomi-mataafa](https://www.rnz.co.nz/collections/u/new-flags-flying/nff-women/naomi-mataafa). This was published subsequently in Ian Johnstone and Michael Powles, eds, *New Flags Flying: Pacific Leadership* (Wellington: Huia, 2012).