

TEENA BROWN PULU

## Is Tonga ready for Paris?



*Photograph Credit: Teena Brown Pulu*

Forget about the speechifying of Tongan Prime Minister, 'Akilisi Pohiva. His political plug at the general debate of the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 30th was to get noticed on the international stage. That, he might have done for a few days in media circles. But once the public excitement over what he'd said had settled, the propaganda shone like a light.

Since when had the Tongan state lobbied against the Indonesian government for their alleged human rights abuses of the Native population in West Papua province? The answer

was never. So why would Pohiva raise it now in his first address as Prime Minister to the United Nations General Assembly?

*Our political priorities must not distract us from the goal in the 2030 agenda [for sustainable development] to leave no one behind. I reemphasise that this goal speaks to us as leaders to work together against injustice and [the] cruel violation of human rights, and, as is the case of West Papua Melanesia in the Pacific, this is within our power. It is a choice that those with power and privilege can make. [The] United Nations has that duty to closely follow-up this West Papua case, and [to ensure] necessary action be taken to stop this brutal and inhuman [sic: inhumane] activities.*

“To leave no one behind” was Pohiva’s take on the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* which mapped out seventeen goals for the world. The sustainable development goals ranged from ending poverty and hunger to promoting peace, justice, and social inclusion. Pohiva had chosen a justice campaign as Tonga’s national interest to pitch to country leaders gathered in the United Nations assembly hall.

But the standout goal for Pacific Island states was number thirteen; that is, to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts,” while at the same time, “acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.”

Not only was the objective to fight against “climate change and its impacts,” but the text also included the United Nations’ rationale on which regions stood to lose the most, who, to no one’s surprise were the “least developing countries and small island developing States.”

*Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. Increases in global temperature, sea level rise, ocean acidification and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries, including many least developed countries and small island developing States. The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk.*

Where did the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* signal the climate solution would come from? In short, at the Paris 2015 conference of the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change* to be held from November 30th to December 11th.

*Looking ahead to the COP21 conference in Paris in December, we underscore the commitment of all States to work for an ambitious and universal climate agreement.*

Mary Robinson, the United Nations Special Envoy on Climate Change, spoke in tune with the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. She thought the small island developing states of the Pacific Ocean had little choice but to talk their way to Paris.

*They [Pacific Islands' heads of government] need to talk to other leaders who'll be gathered in New York, who'll then be in Lima for the climate finance issue to be discussed, [and] who'll be at the Commonwealth where a lot of leaders will be together, which are large and small, and that's an opportunity – all before Paris. Don't leave it to Paris. Work every step of the way to Paris.*

Who was heading Tonga's climate talk en route to the 21st conference of parties in Paris? It wasn't the Prime Minister.

'Akilisi Pohiva was obsessed with justice, a version he invented through his continuous court cases against the former government of Lord Tu'ivakano for spending what he believed was Tongan state funding on the telecommunications company, *TongaSat*.

Perhaps it was Fiji. I kid you not. The Fijian Prime Minister, Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, explained to the 2015 United Nations General Assembly his government had "plans to move forty-five villages to higher ground," and that "we have already started." As well as relocating Fijian nationals at risk of losing their villages to rising sea, the Bainimarama regime had committed Fiji "to resettle people from other low-lying South Pacific states."

*We have committed to resettle people from other low-lying South Pacific Island states who face the object of being swallowed up by the rising ocean, and falling inevitably into oblivion. Should that happen, the people of those island states would be refugees as desperate and lost as the hundreds and thousands fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq. It is very real, and it is happening now, and it is time to shed our indifference.*

Fiji was the *only* South Pacific Island state to have planned for resettling its climate affected citizens, alongside taking in Pacific Islanders from countries subject to forced migration. As Fiji's closest neighbour, Tonga was silent about the likelihood it would have to relocate sections of its population. Thus, systematically calculating whether Tonga might provide a home for climate displaced peoples from other Pacific Islands' states, did not appear on the policy and planning radar.

What was the Tongan state taking to the United Nations climate negotiations? Under 'Akilisi Pohiva's leadership, realistically, was Tonga ready for Paris?