

A Report by Commissioner Nemani Mati on the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Electoral Observer Mission to the 29 August 2025 Samoa General Election

1. The team of 4 personnel was split into two groups. Dr Fiona Hukula of the PIF and myself on one team and the other team comprised Ms. Gayle Manueli of the PIF and Mr. Pita Vuki of the Tonga Electoral Commission.
2. Based on a pre-arranged timetable both teams set out on 27 August to meet international, local government and non-governmental organizations in order to extract their views on the election.
3. **Ms. Karla Hershey, UN Resident Coordinator for Samoa.** Short notice given to this Office on the election and the PIF Observer Mission visit. Snap elections as usual face delays. The process is slow and challenging to diagnose. Local staff were given time off to vote. The UN is not directly involved as an international observer agency. There are two (2) older traditional political parties and seven (7) or eight (8) independents standing in the elections. There is no clear front runner. It will be a close election. A caretaker government is currently in existence. One (1) of the two older traditional political parties previously ruled for close to 40 years. So change is coming. Stress along family lines and family dynamics determine who to vote for. Rules for parties are clearly established. The courts ensure the laws and rules on the electoral process are clearly established and enforced. There have been a number of challenges on the electoral/parliamentary process. The courts have dealt with these cases in a fair, reasonable and democratic way. The Samoan diaspora are also coming to vote. They have political connections. There are lots of online chatter regarding the elections, coming through Facebook. The Journalist Association of Samoa is active in pressing and ensuring there is freedom of expression despite the limitations and challenges it faces. The UN Office is also on the lookout but there have been no reports so far of violence or pressures on social cohesion. The Samoa Observer newspaper represents a strong, democratic and independent civil society voice. The religious and strong culture provide social cohesion and strong voices and influence on the evolving political landscape. The question often asked by observers is, "Who do you vote for and why?" To the average Samoan voter, the answer is simple and straight forward. Culture, family dynamics and religion determine who you vote for.
4. **National University of Samoa (NUS).** The Observer Mission met four (4) strong, intelligent, and independent female academics representing a wide area of research (oral history, politics, philosophy, society and women under conflict and in times of war). The email from PIF for a Talanoa session on the elections came recently. There are lots of happenings, events and discussions taking place both on the ground and online regarding the elections. The months of April to May offered the possibility of elections. And here we are at the end of August. It's election time. Donors and the

diaspora were interested and willing to help. Citizens are more politically aware now compared to 2024. Election campaigns, officially ended recently. Cultural boundaries are under strain. There are heated online debates fueled mainly by the diaspora. Churches, society and culture have stepped in to calm things down. However, the divisions remain. Young people, 19, 20 years old, talk about politics, voting and elections more often now than in the past. There is pressure from the elders on the youths to vote for a certain political party or a candidate. But changes are coming, mainly socioeconomic, have become a major issue. The cost of living has risen and youth opportunities are limited. Women's voices are on the rise and deserve to be heard. Environmental issues need to be dealt with. The online debates between the diaspora and locals are almost scandalous. *Fa Samoa*, the Samoan way of life, the *Matai* system are important and should be preserved. However, there is a mood in the air for change. Land bills are no longer in the centre of political debates. There are other issues involved. Political parties have strong family connections. Culture and the church also play an important role in the political process. Increasingly the diaspora is very strongly involved in these political debates. Remittances play an important role on local politics. The call for snap elections has invigorated Samoan politics and identified a need for a strong voters' education program.

5. **Ombudsman Office and National Human Rights Institution.** As part of its functions, this Office issued a public statement on the right to vote and the election process in English and Samoan languages. It is also monitoring the progress of the snap election. There are more women candidates now and two transgender candidates are standing in this election. The same Office has cooperated with the Public Service Commission (PSC) in informing civil servants to leave early on polling day in order to vote and to help out in the voting process. The National Human Rights Institution is monitoring the events leading up to election day for any human rights violation.
6. **Office of the Attorney General.** The AG Ms. Sua Hellene Wallwork indicated that two candidates were disqualified while 50 are standing in the current election. Parties are conducting their campaigns and advertisements in the public sphere, attacking each other, back and forth. The Samoan population, that is, the society and culture, is strong and stable. There is an alcohol ban from midnight today and in the next 48 hours. A Task Force, comprising the Police, AG's Office and Electoral Commission is in place until after the elections to monitor and manage Facebook and to block or remove any undesirable and dangerous information. Three people have been charged with falsifying documents. The challenge for Samoa is how to transition from a government that ruled for almost 40 years to a new one. The position of the Prime Minister changed. PSC has to be prepared for more changes in this current election.

7. **The Samoa Umbrella for Non-Governmental Organization (SUNGO) Inc.** The Assistant Coordinator (AC), standing in for the Coordinator, Ms. Faapito Opetaita, indicated that fair elections are necessary for proper representation. SUNGO does information work to inform the public on changes to the electoral laws, processes and how elections work. It works on initiatives to empower society in a democratic Samoa, It has cooperated with the Electoral Commission and the Journalist Association to counter disinformation. In 2021, Samoa elected a new government. The next election is due in April 2026. But the government lost support for the 2025/2026 budget by just one single vote. Government was dissolved and thus the current election was held subsequently. SUNGO is concerned by the level of disinformation on the above issues and the lead up to the current election. It has submitted a number of papers on the position of women in elections and Parliament. Apart from challenges facing women voters, SUNGO advocates for women to submit position papers on other issues and challenges affecting them as a group.
8. **Australian and New Zealand High Commissions.** The Observer Mission met with both the Australian and New Zealand High Commissions representatives in the same venue on Thursday 28 August which was declared a public holiday in Samoa. Australia has not received that much information or guidance from Samoa on the general elections. There have been some low-level technical cooperation and these have been kept to a minimum. New Zealand has faced the same situation. Both Australia and New Zealand are active members of the Pacific Islands, Australia, and New Zealand Electoral Association (PIANZEA) and are both strong supporters of free and democratic elections in the member countries. A priority area for both countries has been the challenges faced by elderly voters, women, disabled, minority groups, etc.
9. **Polling Day.** Friday 29 August was polling day. Team 1 comprising PIF's Dr Fiona Hukula and myself visited six polling stations. We were allowed into four of them to observe the counting. In the other two we were not allowed to enter the polling stations, but we could observe from the outside and talk to the voters who had just voted and those who were waiting to cast their votes. No official campaigning was allowed in the vicinity of all six polling stations. This rule was strictly followed. And voting was on time, the number of voters queuing was 100 on average and waiting time was 1 hour on average. The polling stations had clear layout and signage. Voters can come in and out easily and understand where to go. The vote casting process was fairly simple. You enter the main hall. Your name, identity and number are verified. Your detail is announced to presiding officer/s. Your right thumb is inked. You proceed to the voting booth with ballot paper. You vote and drop the ballot paper into a closed and sealed box. You exit the polling station. On average there were eight (8) very helpful polling officials.

10. **Initial Counting at the end of Polling Day.** Both teams, 1 and 2, were allowed to observe the counting process at one of the smaller polling stations, namely the village of the current Prime Minister. In this particular village, all the roofs of the homes, church and meeting halls are painted dark blue as if to demonstrate unity and support for the current government and the Prime Minister who is one of their own.
11. **The Counting Process.** There were four (4) scrutineers representing 4 political parties. The scrutineers were provided with a table and chair facing the election officials comprising a young, intelligent presiding officer who is also a Matai, 5 young female election officials, 1 Policeman and 1 Policewoman. The bag containing ballot papers is unlocked and opened by Official 1 in front of the officials, Police and scrutineers. Official 2 picks out 1 ballot paper, hands it to Official 3 who opens it and reads out loudly the candidate's name and that of the party, walks in front of the scrutineers showing them the ballot paper before handing it over to Official 4 who enters the result in the official record before Official 5 returns the ballot paper into the political party and candidate's box which is sealed and placed under lock at the completion of the counting. The result of the counting is transmitted electronically to the National Results Centre which the Observer Team visited later in the evening.
12. **Pacific Islands Law Officers Network (PILON).** The last official meeting took place on Saturday morning 30th August at the Tanoa International Hotel with Ms. Sasae Walter, Regional Coordinator for PILON. The discussions centered mainly on the effects of law on tradition, language, culture and their continuing influences on democracy, governance and the electoral processes.
13. The observer mission departed Apia for Nadi at 4.55 pm on Sunday 31st August.