TONGAN PRINCE STANDS FIRM IN PACIFIC

By Peter Wagner

HONOLULU (Pacific Islands Report, Dec.9) – Pressure is mounting in the Pacific island nation of Tonga to reconsider its censure of a probing newspaper.

But Tonga, oldest of Polynesian cultures and the region’s only monarchy, is standing firm in the face of growing condemnation over its conflicts with the free press.

"All things have limits," said His Royal Highness, Prince Ulukalala Lavaka Ata, in rare interview outside his native country.

The 44-year-old prince, who is also Prime Minister and a potential heir to Tonga’s throne, spoke recently with Pacific Islands Report about his government’s running battle with the weekly newspaper Taimi o Tonga and with continuing pressure in the region to conform to Western ways.

"It seems to me that newspapers need to be accountable to society and to themselves, just like everybody else," said the prince. "They just railroad over everybody and do these things in the name of the free press."
Ulukalala notes that Tonga’s loudest critics are in Australia and New Zealand – the dominant Western democracies in the region.

"Why should we follow your path?" he asked. "Pure democracy doesn’t work for island countries. Cite me an island country where democracy has worked in the Pacific."

He points to the instability that has torn Bougainville and the nearby Solomon Islands in recent years.

But with advanced degrees from colleges in Australia and the United States, Prince Ulukalala sees much worth borrowing from Western culture. He cites high technology as a particular boon to Tonga, where residents are scattered among 36 of the country’s 169 islands.

"I think we should take the things from the West that are good and technology is certainly one of them," he said. "We can use technology to cut down distances and to enable ‘tele-health’ and ‘tele-education’.

He notes that Tonga has among the lowest telephone and Internet rates in the Pacific – about 0.25 U.S. cents per minute for calls from Tonga to the United States. Tonga has also achieved rapid growth in telecommunications in recent years, going from about 6 percent market penetration in 1990 to over 15 percent today, he said.

"We brought in competition," he said. "Instead of the government owning the only phone company, we opened it up and now we have two phone companies – one government-owned and the other private. And there may be room for a third. We’re looking at that."

The country’s current Internet providers include the government-owned Tonga Communications Corp., which operates as Kalianet, and the privately-operated Tonfon, which recently approached American Samoa to join its network, is owned by Shoreline Group Ltd. Shoreline is headed by Crown Prince Tupouto’a.

These and other business involvements by members of the royal family – Ulukalala’s sister, Princess Pilolevu Tuita is majority shareholder of a telecommunications satellite company that represents the Tongan government - have drawn concern from critics of Tonga’s ruling system and provided fodder for the Taimi o Tonga.

But despite its interest in telecommunications, Tonga characteristically seeks to use it to protect, not change, its culture. Ulukalala said Tonga has built primary and secondary schools on its outlying islands to keep school children at home and in their villages. Access to the Internet, he said, will allow college students to stay at home as well, taking online courses from schools around the world.

"History has shown that once high school students are taken from their island and go to the main island, where there are lots of distractions - like nightclubs, noisy neighbors, beer; things that aren’t very good for study - their study habits degenerate," he said. "But if you supply their studies to them, where they are, where their parents are, where they have family safety nets, they actually do better."

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