Democracy, stability in Samoa praised

"One of the reasons that we're holding this year's dialogue in Samoa is that of all the Pacific countries it's probably been the one that's managed these problems the best, and in a sense I think the Samoan example is one that a few other Pacific Island countries might like to try and follow."

Parliamentarians from nine Pacific island countries are taking part in three days of talks at Satumuafuifui about democracy and stability in the South Pacific. The eighth annual Pacific Parliamentary Dialogue is hosted by Australia's Centre for Democratic Institutions.

With a coup in Fiji and the riots in Tonga, the head of the Centre, Ben Reilly says the dialogue will look at the poor functioning of government in the region.

Graeme Dobell of Radio Australia interviews Ben Reilly, Head of Australia's Centre for Democratic Institutions. Here is their interview in full:

REILLY: This is an event we try and run annually, it's the biggest one we've ever done. We've had parliamentarians from all over the Pacific coming together in Samoa to talk about issues of stability, of democracy, and really how to improve the functioning of their systems of government, because that's the biggest challenge facing the Pacific today, how to actually make government work for the people, because in most of the Pacific governments don't work very well.

DOBELL: Is it a functioning issue or is it a real questioning of the way politics works in the Pacific at the moment?

REILLY: I think this is a questioning time. The events of the last few days in Fiji have obviously raised a lot of issues about democracy and whether democratically elected governments are going to be the future of the Pacific. We had the riots in the Solomon Islands earlier this year, we had the events of last month in Tonga, which is not a democracy at the moment but may be more towards one.

So I think these are real bedrock issues for the Pacific, whether the future of the region lies in democratic politics or whether the future for the region lies in the direction that Commodore Bainimarama in Fiji would like to take it.

DOBELL: Well what's your answer, is democratic politics in the Pacific something with a bit of a life expectancy or is it under threat?

REILLY: Traditionally the Pacific has actually stood up compared to virtually any other developing region of the world when it comes to democracy. In other words virtually all of the states in the Pacific have been democracies for quite a long period of time now, and that really stands in stark contrast to Africa, Latin America and so on. But there's some big weaknesses as well.

One is virtually no women in Pacific politics, most countries only have a handful of elected female MPs, some haven't got any at all in particular. So that's one issue we're focusing on. The other big issue in the Pacific is that often elected parliamentarians don't really feel that they have a national responsibility. They feel that their main parochial interest is their local clan, the local tribe who elected them. But not necessarily to the country as a whole. So one of the big focuses is a focus on national issues and national leadership.

DOBELL: Does democracy, does democratic politics then have shallow roots in the Pacific? If a military commander in Fiji can so easily wipe aside a parliament and an elected Prime Minister?

REILLY: That's a good question, I think in the Melanesian countries, the countries closest to Australia, countries like Papua New Guinea, democracy doesn't work very well, but it actually has quite deep roots in the traditional culture.

The traditional cultures based on big men getting power through oratory and through leadership, and the people by nature are very democratically inclined. More towards Polynesia there's more hierarchical social systems, an aristocratic class and that's been part of the problem in Tonga for example.

But I think over the last 30 or 40 years that there's been democratic systems in the Pacific, Pacific citizens have got used to freedom of association, freedom of press, being able to say what they think, and I'd be very surprised if most Pacific islanders want to give those sorts of rights up.

DOBELL: In Tonga, do you see the riots in Nuku'alofa as being about democracy or was it another problem, was it an unemployment issue taking advantage of a momentary breakdown to do a bit of looting?

REILLY: Well obviously it's some of both. I mean there was clearly an unemployed underclass that was ready to go in Tonga, but the real issue in Tonga is political. They do not have a democratic system of government. You cannot change the government under the existing Tongan constitution. The government is comprised mostly of the traditional aristocracy.

So I think in Tonga there is a very clearly a political element, a strong political element to the riots that happened. If we look at the Solomon Islands again riots, burn down a significant amount of the capital city, but there was also a political element there.

The Prime Minister who had been elected by a discredited former government, and that upset a lot of people. So the two issues are interwoven with disastrous effects as we've seen.

DOBELL: So do you see this eighth dialogue as being a debate or can it come up with any sort of answers?

REILLY: I think what we want to do is highlight some of the real problems facing the Pacific now, and have a clear-eyed discussion and analysis of those problems.

The Pacific is in a lot of trouble, living standards have been declining, the overall standards of governance in much of the Pacific is extremely poor, we've had the coup, another coup, the fourth coup in the last 20 years in Fiji.

There are a lot of problems in the region. One of the reasons that we're holding this year's dialogue in Samoa is that of all the Pacific countries it's probably been the one that's managed these problems the best, and in a sense I think the Samoan example is one that a few other Pacific Island countries might like to try and follow.

So we're using our hosts to maybe come up with a few new ideas and a few pointers to the way forward.

Source: Radio Australia.

Applications are invited for the following Teaching Posts at the following Methodist Church Schools for 2007.

1. Wesley College
   1 Biology/Chemistry - Y12-13
   1 Geography/History - Y12-13
   1 Accounting/Economics - Y12-13
   1 English and Samoan - Y9-11
   1 Maths - Y9-11
   1 Business Studies - Y9-11

2. Uesiliana College
   1 Biology/Chemistry - Y12-13
   1 Physics/Maths - Y12-13
   1 Accounting/Economics - Y12-13

3. Lautumina o Puama'oa Technical & Creative Centre
   1 Carpenter/Joinery Instructor
   1 Communication Instructor
   1 Secretary/Typist

4. George Brown Primary School
   3 Teachers - Year 1-8

Address your application with CV copies of qualifications and References including a letter from your pastor to the undersigned.

Closing Date: 15 December 2007.

The Director
Methodist Church Schools - PO Box 2259
FALEULA