
Reviews

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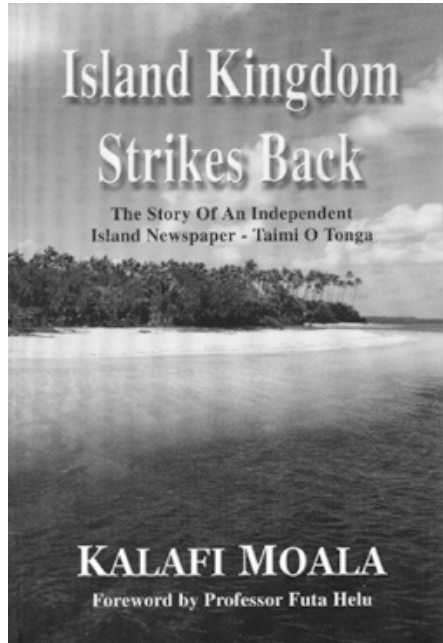
Former editor of the Fiji Daily Post and now a senior subeditor with The Press, Christchurch. He is unrelated to Kalafi Moala of Tonga.

Courageous media catalyst fuelling change behind kingdom's facade

***Island Kingdom Strikes Back: The Story of an Independent Island Newspaper — Taimi 'o Tonga*, by Kalafi Moala. Auckland: Pacmedia Publishers, 2002, 304 pp. ISBN: 0 473 08687 5.**

IF PUBLISHER Kalafi Moala had wanted to bring attention to Tonga's lopsided political system he couldn't have done it better than writing *Island Kingdom Strikes Back*. Since its release in late 2002, the book has continued to fuel debate about the way Tonga is governed by providing a window through which we can see behind the kingdom's friendly facade.

Obviously the book isn't favour-



ite reading in Tonga's royal palace and in the months that followed its release no effort was spared by the kingdom to strike back. The first assault came in February 2003 when *Taimi 'o Tonga*, a twice-weekly Tongan language newspaper published in Auckland and distributed in Tonga, was banned. Moala was told in a letter from Tonga's Chief Commissioner of Revenue the paper had become a 'prohibited import' and was therefore not allowed into the kingdom. Political manoeuvrings in Tonga negated suc-

cessful appeals in the Supreme Court by Moala and ultimately led to the Tongan Government introducing the *Media Operators Act* in July to restrict foreign media ownership in Tonga to 20 per cent, a move that targets Moala, a Tongan by birth and customary rights, but an American citizen. By the middle of August, the Tongan Parliament had passed the first reading of a draconian bill to amend the constitution to give it greater control of the media, suppress criticism of the royal family and restrict the powers of the courts, especially in their rights to review laws.

One would have thought that such pressures from the Tongan Government would have crushed Moala's spirit and his business. The opposite happened. As Moala fought the Tongan elite, *Taimi 'o Tonga* experienced such unprecedented growth in its other markets in New Zealand, Australia and the United States that by August Moala had managed to expand another of his papers, *Samoa International*, and open an office in Apia in preparation for distribution.

This fight is not new to Moala. He says the Tongan Government has been trying to 'shut us down for 14 years'. And it is this tale of official aggression that is told in the book.

The book was written after Moala (1996; Pohiva, 1996; Robie, 1996),

his deputy editor Filokalafi Akau'ola and pro-democracy parliamentarian 'Akilisi Pohiva were imprisoned in 1996 for allegedly bringing Tonga's Parliament into disrepute, a charge for which they were acquitted on appeal to the Supreme Court and for which they sued the Government and won. The book follows events reported by *Taimi* in its first decade plus, although its main theme is to chronicle the events that led to their imprisonment and the events that followed.

By its analysis of these events and its attack on the Tongan elite, this book can easily be seen as nothing more than a hatchet job on the Tongan royalty and noble families. But that is not what this book is about.

Yes, there is strong political commentary, but *Island Kingdom Strikes Back* is much more than about politics alone. It is also an album of Tongan life, told in the ways of the storytellers of the islands, interweaving events so that little things like walking up the stairs, for example, become a journey into a lifetime.

It is written like weaving a mat; taking shape piece by piece, showing that each strand is influenced by the presence of the others, that Tonga and Tongans exist in a complex culture of old customs and contemporary thinking. As a result we have a book that looks at Tongans in relation to their

king, their nobles, their church, their villages and their daily struggles as common people to make a living in a cultural and social system in which wealth is in the hands of a very few.

The book is ultimately about Moala himself and his views of Tonga and things Tongan. It reveals his desire to be a catalyst for change in his country of birth, to be not a bystander but an event maker in a country very much in danger of being left behind in the past century.

When it comes to discussing the king, a ruler he believes to be ‘increasingly out of touch with the people and the issues affecting their lives’ Moala pulls no punches. He reminds the reader again and again of how the King featured in failed opportunities and questionable schemes.

There are times when Moala likes to drive the dagger deeper, saying the King is a man of fiction, a jester in his own court, who believes in his infallibility as Tonga is rocked by scandals, the emperor who plays the flute while the country burns, a leader who has lost coherence in his old age, a man living ‘in an abstract world of his own’ and an impediment to sensible governance (p 273).

Harsh words indeed, but not many Tongans have had the courage to stand up to the King as Moala has done in his book, demanding accountability, call-

ing on the King to humble himself and ask for forgiveness for ‘wrongs done in the past, including those of his forebears’ (p 295). He blames the Tongan leadership for the increase in unemployment, migration, violent crime, corruption, youth suicides, drug and alcohol abuse and poverty. He reports on corruption and nepotism as ‘signals of a leadership in failure’.

Island Kingdom Strikes Back is also a love story of a publisher and his work, of a father and a son, of a husband and his wife and of a man and his country. It is a love story that forced Moala to move to Auckland to live to enable the survival of his newspaper business. It is a love story that makes him one of the successful Pacific Islands publishers with newspaper sales in Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand, Australia and the United States. It is a love story that has made this once Christian missionary one of the region’s leading warriors of free speech.

This is also a story of Moala’s place in Tonga, bequeathed to him by his father, who was a pillar to his son. Through Moala’s father, Masiu, we see a typically proud Tongan man; a yam grower ‘raised well by his parents — always neat and did things in an orderly way’ (p 41). Men like this measured their wealth not by the amount of money they had in the bank, but by the number of pigs they had in

the village and by the amount of help they gave their neighbours. They believe in strong family bonds, people with patience, happy with what they have.

Then there is the love that Moala found in Auckland in the form of a 'pretty, warm and loving woman, seven years my junior'. In January 1995 Moala married Suliana Tupou and found another pillar in his life. Now inseparable, they live happily in Auckland.

But Moala's greatest love of all must be Tonga itself. And lest we should judge him unkindly because of his unforgiving criticism of Tonga's elite, we must remember that in this book Moala tries, above all else, to prove his Tonganness and his love of the country and its people. It, however, must be a Tonga with a leadership that can account for its actions and be answerable to the people. It can no longer be a Tonga served by many for the benefit of a few.

As he says in the concluding chapter:

We are no better than others, but we do have our ability to make a unique contribution for ourselves and to the world of nations. Tongans are a people endowed with unique gifts and aims.

For our children to develop these talents, we must not only reform our

governmental structure, but also our culture, our families, and our very lives (p 297).

References

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