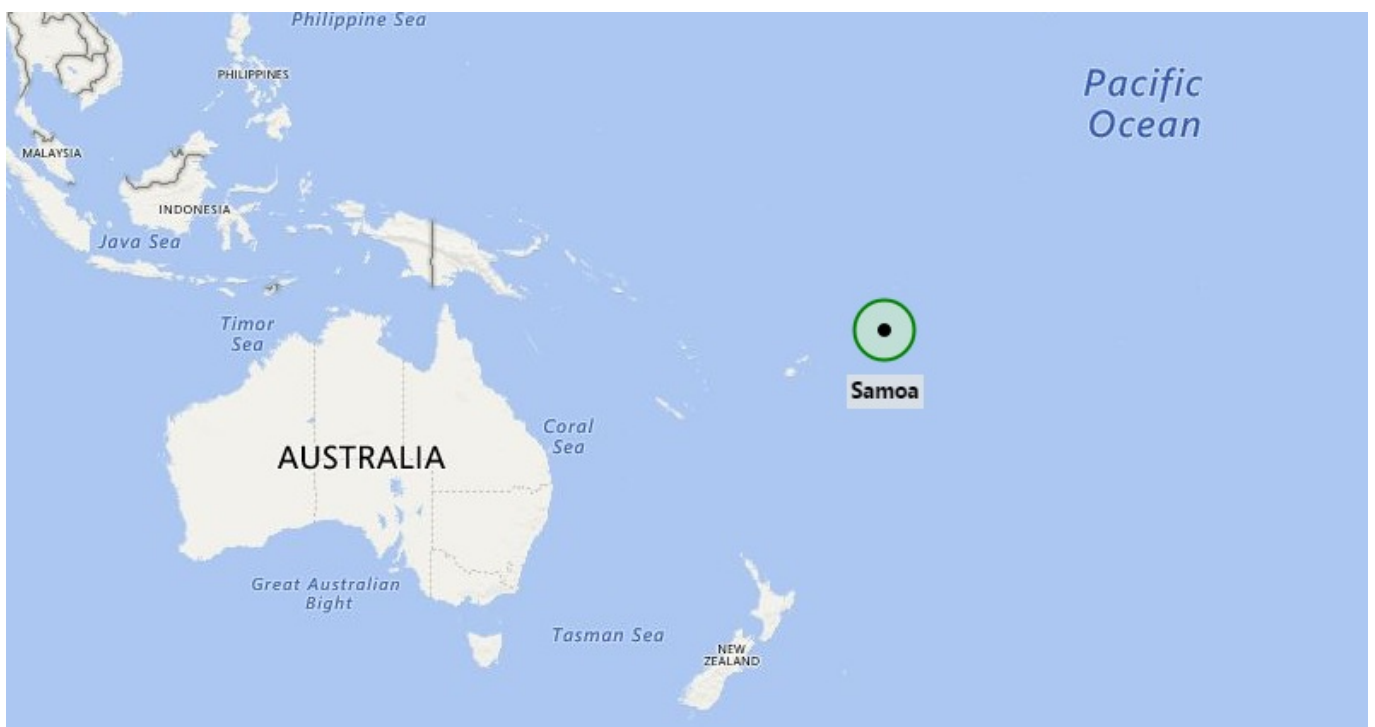


The United Nations has urged political leaders in Samoa to resolve a political crisis through dialogue after contested election results left the South Pacific nation with two leaders claiming to run the country.

FAST party leader Fiame Naomi Mataafa was set to become Samoa's first female prime minister with a court-approved one-seat parliamentary majority before the incumbent prime minister refused to cede power and accused the judiciary of bias.



A U.N. spokesman for Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday the agency would provide support if requested by the parties.

“[Guterres] urges the leaders in Samoa to find solutions to the current political situation through dialogue in the best interest of the people and institutions of Samoa,” the statement said.

The results of the leadership struggle could reframe the island nation's relations with China after Fiame told Reuters last week she would shelve a Beijing-backed port development, calling it excessive for a small country already heavily indebted to China.

Incumbent leader Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, who has governed for more than two

decades, is one of Beijing's closest allies in the South Pacific. He has previously said South Pacific countries only have themselves to blame if they fall into unsustainable debt.

While a series of judicial rulings back Fiaame's claim to be prime minister, Tuilaepa retains the support of Samoa's head of state, who has suspended parliamentary hearings which has frustrated plans to confirm the new government.

The opposition party members held a ceremony to form government outside a locked parliament on Monday in proceedings that Tuilaepa has described as "treason".



Image source: Trendsmap

The political crisis in the small country of 200,000 has drawn in the wider South Pacific community, with the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) the first nation to recognise the Fiaame-led government.

“As the FSM is itself a democracy that both upholds and promotes democratic values, it is imperative that we show our friends - especially during their darkest hours - that we stand with them,” FSM President David Panuelo said in a statement.

Australia and New Zealand have not formally recognised the new government, although both have said democratic processes and the judiciary should be respected.

The Pacific Conference of Churches appealed to the political leaders to act justly and consider the wishes of the people above all else.

*Reporting by Jonathan Barrett; Editing by Michael Perry*

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