Reviews of American Sāmoa, Cook Islands, Hawai‘i, Niue, Tokelau, and Tuvalu are not included in this issue.

**French Polynesia**

Familiar themes are revisited in the year under review. The Tahitian government proceeded with costly public works that are arguably out of proportion to the small territory’s means and needs. While critics may view these as pork-barrel projects in anticipation of the forthcoming elections, they have long been a feature of a territorial economy driven by public expenditure. President Gaston Flosse was once again subject to, but for the time being survived, new and continuing investigations into his alleged involvement in corruption. Notwithstanding the bad public relations generated by corruption charges coupled with a law redistributing seats in favor of the urban constituencies, the Tahe-raa party’s cast-iron grip on power was confirmed in both municipal and territorial elections. Emboldened by his party’s unprecedented victory at the polls, President Flosse continued to chafe at the limits imposed on his power by the French state.

Public works have been a motor of growth, especially since France has provided funds to facilitate a post–nuclear testing conversion of the territorial economy. This year was no exception. A major new development is the construction of a territorial hospital center at Taaone to replace the aging facility at Mamao. It will include a general hospital, psychiatric ward, blood transfusion center, and accommodations for families. First flagged in 1996 at an estimated cost of FCFP 10 billion, it was not until July 2000 that a company was chosen to build the hospital at a revised cost of FCFP 22 billion. By October the budget had grown to FCFP 32 billion (FR 1.76 billion). President Flosse then asked the minister for Overseas France, Christian Paul, for a financial contribution of 65 percent from the state. Paul agreed, but on the condition the territory demonstrate the means to maintain a hospital of this size.

The French state was not alone in voicing concerns. An opposition leader, Boris Léontieff, considered the cost exorbitant for a small territory, especially compared to the mere FCFP 5 billion required to renovate the existing hospital. Léontieff cited a French specialist who estimated the normal cost for a hospital of this kind would be at most FCFP 18 billion. Moreover, maintenance costs would be in the order of 10 percent of the capital outlay, which in the case of the territory’s proposal would be 3 billion per year. Léontieff believed that not only the initial outlay but also the maintenance costs would exceed the territory’s financial means. The other opposition leader, Oscar Temaru, decried the hospital initiative as a public relations stunt in the lead-up to the 2001 elections.

Meanwhile, the state refused to
participate until it had fully explored the financial implications of the proposal. Flosse was furious at the delay and issued an ultimatum that, if the state was not prepared to contribute and honor its commitments, the territory would finance the entire project alone. In January Flosse’s majority in the assembly went ahead and voted for the territory to fund the hospital 100 percent, thereby allowing the president to sign contracts and proceed with a ceremony to lay the first stone (TP, Feb 2001, 27–29).

The territorial government has also invested significant monies in improving infrastructure throughout the outer islands by way of building new roads, ports, and airports. The jewel in the crown of this plan is the complete renovation of the port town of Uturoa on Raiatea in the Leeward Islands. The first phase of this scheme has been completed with a new port costing FCFP 7.3 billion (FR 400 million). This includes a reception area for luxury cruise ships, extension of the docks, an artisan village, a public park, and administrative headquarters for the port authority (TP, Feb 2001, 33–35).

The territory’s fledgling international airline, Air Tahiti Nui found itself in dire financial straits after losses of FCFP 3 billion in its first two years of operation. The key factors cited for its troubles were the rise of the US dollar and a parallel increase in fuel costs. In November 2000 the territory was obliged, once again, to engage in a financial bailout to the tune of FCFP 1.4 billion to prevent the airline’s collapse. Flosse went still further by guaranteeing that the territory would meet any unforeseen shortfalls that the company might face up to the year 2005. The difficulties of a French airline, AOM, which could no longer continue flights between Paris and Papeete, opened the way for Air Tahiti Nui to mount an ambitious expansion of its operations, including a flight to France in addition to its existing routes to Japan and the United States. After months of negotiations with the French state, Flosse announced in June that Air Tahiti Nui would rent another Airbus and commence flights to Paris no later than September 2001. It is unclear how this costly expansion will be funded, but the state has been called on to contribute (TP, July 2001, 9).

The year under review was a mixed blessing in terms of Gaston Flosse’s continuing travails at the hands of French justice. To his dismay, in November investigations began into several new cases of alleged corruption concerning not only the president but also his family. In one case Flosse and his son Reginald came under suspicion in relation to major loans made by the Socredo Bank to the Flosse family. Allegedly, loans amounting to billions of French Pacific francs had been made without the proper procedures being followed and had not been repaid in the normal manner. Another affair concerned the alleged impropriety of Flosse’s wife, Tonita, in making use of government personnel and equipment for major construction works at her private property in Opoa on the island of Raiatea. These works, which included terracing land, rerouting a road, and building a massive wall, implicated the president in illegal use of public goods for personal gain and his wife for receipt of such goods (TP, Dec 2000, 38–40).

Flosse was in strife on another
front in late January as the correctional tribunal in Paris began investigating his personal wealth. This process relates to a 1988 French law (modified in 1995) requiring national deputies and senators to provide a detailed account of their wealth when they assume office and again when they leave office. Such audits are meant to deter or, failing that, detect and prosecute cases of corruption. In Flosse’s case, the court detected discrepancies between the declarations made by Flosse in 1991 when he was reelected deputy, and in 1995 when he completed this term of office. In particular the enquiry focused on Flosse’s failure to declare paintings in his personal art collection worth several million French francs as well as two apartments in Paris occupied by his children. For the time being, the judicial enquiry is restricted to ascertaining whether Flosse made an initial false declaration, rather than investigating the means by which he obtained his remarkable wealth. The trial will be held in September 2001 (TP, Mar 2001, 10–11).

Under the circumstances, Flosse was enormously relieved by the final outcome of his protracted trial relating to the Hombo Affair (see von Strokirch 2001). After his conviction in November 1999, Flosse succeeded in having both the conviction and the sentence revised in his favor by the French appeals court in June 2001. His conviction stands for allowing the operation of an illegal casino in Pirae when he was mayor during the early 1990s. However, his conviction for corruption with regard to the casino owner’s funding of Flosse’s political party as a quid pro quo was overturned. Flosse’s penalty was thus reduced to a fine of FR 15,000 and, more important, the suspended prison sentence and ineligibility for public office were dropped (TP, July 2001, 10).

In a long-awaited decision, on 10 January 2001 the French Constitutional Council confirmed new electoral laws pertaining to the territorial assembly to allow more equitable representation between the five archipelagoes. A final major amendment to the law compared to the one outlined in the previous review increased the total number of seats in the assembly from 41 to 49 (von Strokirch 2001). The outcome therefore implemented the model prescribed by the Tahoeraa party. As a result, the populous Windward Islands were allocated 10 additional seats for a total of 32, whereas the Leeward Islands and the Tuamotu-Gambiers each lost a seat, leaving them with 7 and 4 respectively. The Australs and Marquesas each retained their existing 3 seats. In recognition of their isolation and limited influence in territorial affairs, the outer islands still exercise an advantage in requiring fewer votes to obtain a seat, but the gap has narrowed.

The opposition in French Polynesia campaigned to have the municipal and territorial elections held simultaneously in 2001, for two reasons. First, they pointed to the enormous cost associated with organizing territory-wide polls and logically concluded that it would be more cost effective to hold them at the same time. Second, they argued on the basis of past experience that the territorial elections would be unduly influenced by the outcome of the municipal poll if it were held just two months earlier. The latter argument has merit, as mayors are susceptible to persuasion by the
territorial government, while the mayors in turn hold great sway over the voting behavior of their constituents. However, the opposition was unsuccessful, and the elections went ahead in March and May respectively.

The two rounds of municipal elections held on 11 and 18 March yielded no great surprises. The leaders of the main political parties retained control of the key urban fiefdoms: Boris Léontieff in Arue, Oscar Temaru in Faaa, and Emile Vernaudon in Mahina. Gaston Flosse’s son-in-law and vice president of the government, Edouard Fritch, survived his recently organized succession to Flosse as mayor of Pirae. Another leading light of Tahoeraa, Deputy Michel Buillard, was reelected mayor of Papeete. A Tavini party candidate, Raymond Van Bastolaer, succeeded in wrestling control of Haapiti on Moorea, but another pro-independence candidate, Jacqui Drollet, lost his office as mayor of Hitiaa. Ecologist Jacky Bryant posed a serious challenge to the incumbent Tahoeraa minister and mayor of Bora Bora by winning 47 percent of the vote in the second round. Overall the Tahoeraa party dominated the municipal elections, with the exception of a major setback in the Marquesas. As a result of long-standing regional disaffection with central government and its failure to provide a secure water supply, Tahoeraa secured only one of the six inhabited islands.

The territorial election, held on 6 May, produced an unprecedented victory for the incumbent Tahoeraa government as it won an absolute majority with 28 of the 49 seats. Tahoeraa increased its share of the total vote to 49 percent, up from 39 percent in the 1996 election. The pro-independence Tavini party won 13 seats but did not increase its overall share from the 25 percent recorded in 1996. The Fetia Api party of Boris Léontieff polled remarkably well in winning 7 seats, having previously held only 2. One independent, Chantal Flores, was elected from the Australs. The big loser at this election was Emile Vernaudon and his Ai’a Api party, which gained no representation as it failed to reach the 5 percent minimum vote threshold in the Windward Islands.

This outcome points to an anomaly in the electoral system, which militates against small parties and undermines the democratic nature of the results. Party lists that gain less than 5 percent of the vote in any of the five archipelagoes are automatically eliminated. Consequently, in 2001 the following voters gained no representation: 11.6 percent in the Windward Islands, 18.7 percent in the Tuamotus, and 24 percent in the Marquesas. This factor, combined with the bias in favor of the outer islands where Tahoeraa polls strongest, allowed the conservative party to gain 57 percent of the seats despite having only 49 percent of the votes. The electorate is gradually learning the lesson, as far fewer people voted for small parties in 2001 than they did in previous elections (TP, May 2001, 10–11).

The extent of Tahoeraa’s win at the territorial elections confounded predictions that, even if the opposition did not take government, it would at least increase its representation. Such a shift was anticipated in view of the new law adding seats to the urban constituencies, and the bad publicity
associated with the president’s interminable battle against corruption charges. The opposition did not get as high a proportion of seats attributed to the urban areas as it would have liked. Yet no matter what weighting was given to constituencies, Tahoeraa would still have won as it obtained half of all the votes territory-wide.

With regard to the second factor, corruption has never figured strongly in the decisions of voters in the past, and the 2001 elections demonstrate that nothing has changed. Moreover, as the incumbent governing party in charge of distributing financial largesse from France in the post-nuclear era, Tahoeraa exercised an enormous advantage over the opposition. Finally, Flosse’s strategy of wooing leading lights from the opposition with the promise of ministerial portfolios has been instrumental in the demise of two long-standing parties, Here Ai’a and Ai’a Api.

The political landscape has become more clear-cut, with only three parties left to spar in the assembly. Tahoeraa stands for continuing inclusion in the French Republic while also seeking an expansion of the territory’s powers. Tavini advocates sovereign independence but recognizes that the reality of economic dependence dictates a close association with France in the long term. Regardless of political status, both parties demand that France continue to underwrite the territory’s economic development by way of compensation for thirty years of nuclear testing. The other opposition party, Fetia Api, is against independence yet differentiates itself by engaging in fierce critiques of the Tahoeraa government’s policies and alleged corruption. Not surprisingly, all three parties have similar programs for economic development. In view of the territory’s limited resources they can but focus on its strengths—namely tourism, black pearls, and other marine resources.

A significant outcome of the 2001 election was the huge increase in women’s representation, thanks to a new French “parity” law requiring gender alternation of electoral candidates on party lists (see background in von Strokirch 2001). The new territorial assembly includes no fewer than twenty-two women, compared to only five before. In another milestone, on 17 May the assembly elected a Tahoeraa member, Lucette Taero, as its first woman president (the equivalent of a Speaker in parliament). The following day Gaston Flosse was reelected president of the government. He then announced a new cabinet lineup that included six women out of the total of seventeen ministers.

The war of words between Flosse, who is aligned with the metropolitan conservative party, and the Socialist government in Paris continued unabated in the year under review. In addition to the dispute over the state’s delay in funding for the new hospital, further points of tension include the alleged partiality of the state-funded television service, RFO; the role of the president’s Polynesia Intervention Group; and the extent and timeliness of other state financial transfers.

Gaston Flosse is notorious for his intolerance of criticism and his unending conflicts with elements of the territorial media. In the past the president’s public attacks, boycotts, and litigation have been directed toward
the pro-independence radio station Reo Tefana, the nonpartisan magazine Tahiti Pacifique, and the private television network, Telefenua. However, this year the French state television network, RFO, has also displeased him because it occasionally issues unfavorable reports on aspects of territorial government. One RFO-TV journalist provoked the president to such an extent that Flosse took concrete measures to sabotage RFO-TV. First he issued a threat in April that the post and telecommunications office would deny RFO-TV access to the satellite necessary for its transmission to the outer islands. (This threat was later acted on in July 2001 for the space of a week.) The president then denied RFO-TV the right to film July’s Heiva festivities, the single most important cultural event of the year. Instead the monopoly on filming Heiva was granted to the territory’s own fledgling TNTV, a network that is not yet accessible to all viewers (TP, July 2001, 26–27).

The territorial government has also been developing its own media sources to counteract the media elements it perceives as partial to the opposition. The previous review analyzed the purpose of the hastily inaugurated TNTV service, an operation financed 80 percent by the territory (von Strokirch 2001). In addition, the presidential information service began publishing its own Te Fenua newsletter, distributed free locally, to give its spin on current events and highlight achievements of the government. In order to better reach and influence an international audience, in January the territory launched the Tahitian Press Agency. January also saw the inauguration of a new government service for “international relations,” replacing the former “external relations” service advising the president. The title and function of this service have since been questioned by the state as exceeding territorial powers of autonomy.

A continuing source of tension between the territorial government and the French state has been the ambiguous and ever-expanding role of the Polynesia Intervention Group. In the wake of the destructive 1995 riots the president set up this force, initially as an extension of the presidential security guard. In mid-1996 the state overruled a proposal that the presidential security forces be armed. Not until May 1998 did the territorial assembly officially approve the establishment of the group. At the time, its principal missions were defined as assisting the population in the event of natural disasters, ensuring essential maritime traffic, reinforcing the provision of public works and services, and maintaining the security of public places. This provoked a prompt intervention from the French high commissioner, who emphasized that under no circumstances should the force supplant the role of the national police in the provision of law and order, as this was an exclusive power of the state. The force has since earned credit for its role in disaster relief following cyclones and floods in 1997 and 1998. However, it has caused some concern as its extensive public works have circumvented planning regulations. In July 2000 the high commissioner issued a warning that the Polynesia Intervention Group must respect
existing laws and not exceed its powers with respect to public security. The opposition is also alarmed at the potential scope for abuse given that this militia-type force of several hundred is under the direct control of the president (TP, Aug 2000, 28–29).

President Flosse has continued his long-standing practice of deriding the state for its perceived failings, including tardiness in delivering financial transfers already committed under long-term funding schemes. On one occasion in the territorial assembly, buoyed by his recent election victory in June, Flosse launched into a tirade against the socialist government. Flosse charged that “state officials, in perfect harmony with the administrative tribunal, work on a daily basis to void our autonomy of all substance.” He went further, asserting, “It is not acceptable that the socialist government and its local representatives exercise their political pressure and attempt to influence the result of the elections in pursuit of their partisan interests” (TP, June 2001, 10, my translation). Evidently Flosse gained no joy from the new state minister for Overseas France, Christian Paul, who stated in no uncertain terms that France was a partner in development but had no intention of issuing blank checks to French Polynesia. The state is well within its rights to monitor the use of funds to ensure they are spent productively in the way intended in original agreements. Conversely, there is merit in Flosse’s critique of the state’s financing diverse military-related operations with funds ostensibly designated for the territory’s economic development. The foreign legion, adapted military service, dismantling of the test center, and radiological surveillance of Moruroa are cases in point.

To a casual observer it may appear counterintuitive for the president to persist in biting the hand that sustains not only his government, but also the territory’s economy and high standard of living. Nevertheless, this practice has been tried and proven to good effect in the past. Antistate rhetoric works well for local consumption insofar as it diverts attention from the territorial government’s own policies and lays responsibility for delayed development projects squarely at the door of the state. But no evidence exists that socialist governments in the past have been less generous in the scale of financial transfers to French Polynesia. Rather, it could be argued that left-leaning governments are more susceptible to arguments about the territory’s right to compensation for a legacy of French colonialism and nuclear testing. Flosse is well aware of this bargaining chip and is systematically playing it in anticipation of negotiations for renewed state funding when the grant for reconverting the post-testing economy expires in 2005.

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References


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