Polynesia in Review: Issues and Events,
1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008

Reviews of American Sāmoa, Hawai‘i, Niue, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna are not included in this issue.

Cook Islands

Issues in the Cook Islands during the period under review highlight controversial government decisions as well as some notable judicial and parliamentary amendments. Government indifference to voter concerns was reflected in conflicts at Aitutaki and Manihiki airports, a drawn out debate over an indoor stadium for the country, the sudden discontinuation of the vaka (district) council, unfair cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), and even a challenge from the traditional leadership in the House of Ariki. This review underlines the growing disconnect between the Cook Islands government and Cook Islanders, and the marginalization of Cook Islands Māori and their paramount chiefs.

The loss of one of the greatest sons of the Cook Islands was a sad event for all Cook Islanders. Dr Thomas Robert Alexander Harries Davis KBE (1917–2007), former prime minister of the Cook Islands and a United States Apollo Space Program scientist, passed away on 23 July 2007 (CIN, 24 July 2007, 1, 5). He was a well-known medical doctor, scientist, statesman, author, voyager, and Pacific politician, who played a major role in the formation of the East-West Center’s Pacific Islands Development Program in Hawai‘i (CIN, 28 July 2007, 5). Hundreds attended his state funeral on 27 July at the Are Kari Oi Nui (CIN, 30 July 2007, 1).

Landowners of two outer-island airports were dissatisfied with the government. At one point Manihiki Airport landowners, angry about lease terms, initiated a forced airport closure by spreading debris over the runway to render it unusable (CIN, 5 July 2007, 1). They later agreed to a new lease arrangement for sixty acres of land at an estimated value of NZ$200 per acre (CIN, 1 Feb 2008, 1). (One NZ dollar was the equivalent of US$0.69 as of August 2008.) Despite the agreement, a flight to Manihiki was turned back by some disgruntled Manihiki airport landowners (CIN, 14 May 2008, 1). A police patrol boat was required to help keep the peace (CIN, 16 May 2008, 1).

Conflict at the Aitutaki airport focused on the desire of local residents to keep the Sabbath holy (CIN, 12 June 2008, 1). About 300 protestors strongly, yet peacefully, expressed their displeasure at government-sponsored efforts to land planes on the island on Sundays (CIN, 23 June 2008, 1). The peaceful demonstration was in contrast to previous occasions when debris was spread on the runway. In recognition of continuing high emotions, the government agreed to a six-month trial period, although expressions of resistance to Sunday
landings continue (CIH, 28 June 2008, 2).

The courts were busy this year beginning with what is believed to be the first successful defamation case in the Cook Islands. The case was successfully argued by lawyer Charles Little for William Framhein against property developer Tim Tepaki (CIN, 2 July 2007, 1). The judge awarded NZ$90,000 to Framhein. Prominent businessman Richard Barton was convicted on five charges of willfully filing false income tax returns and fined (CIN, 10 Nov 2007, 1). The American owners of the South Pacific School of Medicine indicated that they plan to take the government to court for reneging on a contract to open a school in the Cook Islands (CIN, 12 June 2008, 1). Meanwhile, Vai Peua, the member of Parliament for Pukapuka Island, criticized the Cook Islands High Court and Justice System for sending criminals to the outer islands to serve out their sentences. He also lashed out at the police for failing to monitor a criminal who shot three people on his island (CIN, 31 July 2007, 1).

The tourism industry faced both challenges and opportunities. Cook Islands Tourism Corporation chief executive Chris Wong resigned after pressure from various sectors of the public for alleged financial discrepancies (CIN, 28 July 2007, 1). John Dean was selected to succeed Wong (CIN, 20 Feb 2008, 1) and now faces several major challenges in maintaining tourism as the country’s major industry. The Asian Development Bank outlook highlighted the vulnerability of the tourism industry in the Cook Islands, with its inadequate and aging infrastructure. Aggressive approaches by some local operators proved counterproductive. The Rarotonga Beach Resort, for example, generated some negative publicity when it charged a man NZ$100 for using its beachfront (CIN, 18 Sept 2007, 1). The Crown Law Office contributed to the debate by pointing out that the resort’s property ended at the high-water mark, which can be difficult to define because of erosion, rising sea level, or land reclamation (CIN, 21 Sept 2007, 1).

In spite of these challenges, the high standards maintained by some operators attracted global attention. At the World Travel Awards held in Sydney on 10 June 2008, the Cook Islands received several prestigious accolades. Additionally, a proposed new Kia Orana Air group sought an operating license so that it could compete against the successful Air Raro (CIN, 6 May 2008, 1). However, rising fuel costs will be a major challenge for the new airline. For example, one-way fares on Air Raro from Rarotonga to Manihiki went up during the year from NZ$682 to NZ$1150, an increase of 69 percent (CIN, 17 Oct 2007, 1).

Development needs also extend to health. In a report presented to a Cook Islands health conference, Dr Kevin Palmer of the World Health Organization indicated that the country was in dire need of more health personnel. However, Dr Palmer also horrified many local residents when he declared that Reslin spraying was one of the safest insecticides in the world, and recommended the use of DDT, a substance that is banned in many countries (CIN, 13 July 2007, 1).

The shipping issue continues to
heat up in Parliament and, in spite of the public uproar, the government has reportedly incorporated a contingency budget allocation for the purchase of a ship (CIN, 12 Feb 2008, 1). Express Cook Islands Line had sought approval for a ten-year shipping license to enable it to build a new 114-meter-long cargo ship to service the country. The government now faces the need to upgrade the harbor, which cannot accommodate ships this long, and remove the current two-year license restriction (CIN, 5 March 2008, 1). By March 2008, a NZ$6 million harbor extension was being implemented (CIN, 7 March 2008, 1).

In the fishing area, a two-member team from Greenpeace, Nilesh Goundar and Sari Tolvanen, visited the Cook Islands to lobby for a sustainable and equitable Pacific fishery (CIN, 17 July 2007, 7). Prime Minister Jim Marurai agreed to champion the campaign to save the Pacific tuna (CIN, 18 July 2007, 1). Several troubling incidences occurred within Cook Islands waters. Two Koreans and a Vietnamese employed on the fishing vessel FV Matira were left stranded on Rarotonga for three months when the shipowner refused to pay their salaries, accusing the men of damaging his vessel (CIN, 18 July 2007, 1). The Korean Embassy in Wellington was drawn into the matter, and fighting between the Korean and Vietnamese crewman further complicated communication difficulties (CIN, 9 Aug 2007, 1; 10 Aug 2007, 1). In September, the FV Moana sank in rough seas forty kilometers off Rarotonga, although the three Fijian crewmen were rescued (CIN, Sept 2007, 1). In early 2008, Tapi Taio’s cargo ship MV Maungaroa was washed up on Avatiu harbor and then his FV Ana was grounded on the reef two months later (CIN, 17 March 2008, 1). Fortunately, FV Ana was successfully and safely removed (CIN, 19 March 2008, 1). However, the wreckage of MV Maungaroa remains on the Avatiu reef (CIN, 2 April 2008, 1).

At one point, controversy erupted over government plans to scuttle the derelict MV Mataora seven miles off Rarotonga, fully laden with asbestos waste (CIN, 29 Oct 2007, 1). Locals were disturbed by the government’s secrecy and rushed approach to the dumping, and called on Greenpeace to intervene (CIN, 29 Oct 2007, 1). Despite the protests, and although bad weather interceded, the sinking was eventually carried out (CIN, 3 Nov 2007, 1).

Continuing its support of various Cook Islands development projects, China loaned NZ$9.3 million to assist in the construction of an indoor stadium and the relocation of the Ministry of Education offices. Foreign Affairs Minister Wilkie Rasmussen initially questioned some of Deputy Prime Minister Dr Terepai Maoate’s statements about the China loan, suggesting that Maoate should have walked away from it (CIN, 30 Aug 2007, 1). The conflict escalated when Rasmussen threatened to push to remove Maoate from the cabinet (CIN, 3 Sept 2007, 1). Prime Minister Jim Marurai shied away from the public spat between his two ministers, preferring to deal with it “in house” (CIN, 7 Sept 2007, 1). Meanwhile the Chamber of Commerce weighed in requesting more discussion of the indoor stadium contract, and mounting public opposition forced the government to
place the project on hold (CIN, 7 Sept 2007, 1; 11 Sept 2007, 1). By October 2007, the cabinet finally approved the new indoor sports stadium for the 2009 Pacific Mini Games. The expected grant from China would go toward the cost of constructing the stadium, but the source of funding for the hosting of the mini games, estimated at NZ$2.715 million, was still unclear (CIN, 25 Oct 2007, 1). The government later sought to increase the amount of the soft loan from China to NZ$13 million (CIN, 16 Feb 2008, 1).

Mini games CEO David Lobb expressed outrage that the planned sports complex had not been fully discussed with the local sports community, and his criticism received support from Cook Islands National Olympic Committee President Tiki Matapo (CIN, 16 Feb 2008, 1; 22 Feb 2008, 1). The government’s indecision over the hosting of the world youth netball championship also caused anxiety among sports organizers (CIN, 5 March 2008, 1). Amid public criticism, the prime minister reconfirmed that the government will deliver on the sports facility (CIN, 6 March 2008, 1; 8 March 2008, 1). The International Netball Federation board subsequently reaffirmed the Cook Islands as the host for the 2008 World Youth Netball Tournament (CIN, 8 April 2008, 1).

The projects sank further into conflict when the Chamber of Commerce renewed its demands that the government stop the multimillion-dollar China loan and abandon plans for the indoor sports complex (CIN, 25 Feb 2008, 1). The Chinese government expressed concern about the negative public comments and indicated that the soft loan might be withdrawn (CIN, 30 April 2008, 1; 7 May 2008, 1). The government revitalized its commitment to the loan but promised that 50 percent of the money will be given to local contractors. At the close of the year in review the loan was finalized (but not signed), and contracts to construct the stadium were in place.

While open public conflict over the national stadium continued, the University of the South Pacific–Cook Islands committee suggested that the proposed Pacific studies campus on Rarotonga was far more important than the stadium. A sixty-year lease for fifteen acres of land had already been approved for such a campus, but planning was delayed pending a more positive government response (CIN, 5 Sept 2007, 1).

A major issue throughout the year was the cost of living adjustment (COLA) for Cook Islands public servants. President of the Cook Islands Workers Association Anthony Turua was critical of how the politicians’ 4 percent COLA was quickly approved, backdated, and paid out, while public servants had to wait (CIN, 9 July 2007, 1). The opposition members of Parliament joined the censure by questioning the government’s mishandling of budgeting and payouts (CIN, 11 July 2007, 1). The Workers Association opted to go to court over the COLA issue, with Turua pointing to increases in fuel prices, power and phone bills, freight costs, and a 100 percent markup on the cost of commodities. He also highlighted the fact that COLA had been ignored since 2001 (CIN, 14 Sept 2007, 1). In October, the cabinet agreed to a limited 4 percent COLA
payout, but union members said that the decision fell short of what had already been approved for public servants (CIN, 18 Oct 2007, 1). Also, the proposed payout was not backdated as it had been for politicians (CIN, 19 Oct 2007, 1). Opposition spokesman Norman George agreed with the public servants and criticized the government for its mishandling of the COLA and sports stadium issues (CIN, 24 Oct 2007, 1).

As the COLA debate continued, new salaries for heads of ministries were recommended (CIN, 18 Feb 2008, 1). Unlike public servants, “secret” pay increases for members of Parliament were reportedly approved. The prime minister received an increase from NZ$75,000 to NZ$105,000, and the MP base salary was increased from NZ$35,000 to NZ$50,000 (CIN, 7 June 2008, 1). Subsequently, it was revealed that the finance secretary was to receive NZ$120,000 per year (CIN, 8 June 2008, 1). The salary review for other heads of ministries finally established top salaries at NZ$75,000 plus per annum (CIN, 9 June 2008, 1; 14 June 2008, 1).

There was also controversy when the government suddenly abolished the Rarotonga Island’s Vaka Council, which was scheduled to cease operating by February 2008. Minister of Internal Affairs Ngamau Munokoa explained that the locally elected Vaka Council was not maintaining the upkeep of community roadsides, road drainage systems, and streams. Council mayors challenged Munokoa’s reasoning and pointed out that they had accomplished much more than their budget allocation called for, and that mayors had always received support from the communities they served (CIN, 10 Oct 2007, 1).

Relationships with the House of Ariki also plagued the government during 2007–2008. Established in 1967, the House of Ariki has become an important and recognized voice on traditional culture and land issues (CIN, 26 July 2007, 5). However, the institution has been marginalized by the government and maintains merely an advisory role with no real powers. This may have made Ariki leaders vulnerable to outsiders who come in with promises of respect as well as support for land control and cultural integrity. Bruce Ruatapu Mita, an eloquent Australia-based New Zealand Māori with an appreciation of traditional leadership, exploited this vulnerability. While the government quickly labeled Mita as a scam artist seeking seabed mineral rights, Mita organized secret meetings with traditional chiefs and convinced many to follow his advice (CIN, 2 May 2008, 1; 30 May 2008, 1). Calling themselves Te Ui Ariki Ngateitei O Te Kuki Airani, several of the country’s paramount chiefs signed a proclamation declaring that they no longer recognized the government, Parliament, the Crown, and ties to the British queen, and that the country’s natural land and sea resources belonged to them. Spokesmen Vakatini Ariki and Vaeruarangi Teaukura Ariki publicly read the proclamation, stating that now was the time to rid the country of government politics, which had marginalized and ignored traditional leaders.

The prime minister turned down a request by Vakatini Makea Ariki to meet, and Deputy Prime Minister Terepai Maoate suggested that the Ui
Ariki proclamation appeared to be treasonous (CIN, 12 June 2008, 1; 13 June 2008, 1). After pressure from the government, the House of Ariki reaffirmed their support of the queen as head of state. Opposition members also urged the government to refrain from legal or negative responses, and to respect the basis of the concerns expressed by the paramount chiefs.

Bruce Mita was not the only person to show interest in seabed mining (CIN, 29 April 2008, 1). US Ambassador William F McCormick met with Maoate and expressed interest in a joint US–Cook Islands exploration of the manganese nodule in the Cook Islands exclusive economic zone (CIN, 10 Nov 2007, 1). A Canadian merchant bank also sought access to the Cook Islands seabed minerals, describing them as being worth billions (CIN, 20 Nov 2007, 1).

Maoate agreed to reinstate the nodule advisory committee and alluded to ongoing discussions with the Norwegian government, International Financial Corporation, Commonwealth Secretariat, and Asian Development Bank (CIN, 17 April 2008, 1). When the opposition boycotted the nodule committee, its leader, Tom Marsters, explained that seabed mining “is the future of the Cook Islands” and that the government should leave it to the professionals (CIN, 18 April 2008, 1). Instead of a committee, the opposition recommended that the prime minister create a nodules portfolio (CIN, 23 April 2008, 1). The World Bank offered to provide support for development of the country’s seabed resource in the most environmentally sustainable and financially secure manner (CIN, 28 April 2008, 1).

The export of fresh maile lei (garland made from the leaves of the fragrant maile vine) from the Cook Islands to Hawai‘i was seriously and abruptly affected by the shutdown of Aloha Airlines, which prevented the shipment of thousands of dollars worth of the plants (CIN, 2 May 2008, 1). On a more positive note, the ANZ Bank opened a solar-powered branch in Aitutaki Island, a first in the Pacific. The forty-eight solar panels produce 12,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity per year (CIN, 25 Oct 2007, 1).

Perhaps the most tragic development for the Cook Islands occurred on the road, with seven accidental deaths in twelve months. Rarotonga’s per capita death toll from traffic accidents is the highest in the world (CIN, 10 Aug 2007, 1). Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, the government pushed for an amendment to the Transport Act 1967. It sought to change the speed limit, introduce immediate fines, and require motor-cycle riders to wear helmets. The amendment called for jail terms and heavy fines for reckless driving that results in bodily harm (CIN, 15 Sept 2007, 1). After public consultations, the amendment was refined, and the speed limit on the island of Rarotonga was reduced from sixty to fifty kilometers per hour (ie, thirty-seven to thirty-one miles per hour). Exceeding the speed limit would result in fines up to NZ$250 (CIN, 27 Oct 2007, 1). A petition against motorcyclists being required to wear helmets emerged, with the anti-helmet group arguing that the headgear should not be mandatory (CIN, 26 March 2008, 1; 3 April 2008, 1). Bowing to pres-
sure, the government scrapped the compulsory helmet law, inadvertently leaving some retail shops stuck with preordered supplies of helmets (CIN, 4 April 2008, 1). Police also began using laser guns to catch speeding drivers (CIN, 16 April 2008, 1).

In the 2007–2008 period, the Cook Islands Parliament passed an electoral amendment act that clearly defines the process by which a prime minister may be removed from office, either by the defeat of an annual appropriations budget, or a vote of no confidence. The act also forces members to vote according to party lines or automatically lose their seats. This part of the act attempts to prevent the party hopping that has led to the formation of new governments outside of Parliament (CIN, 11 Aug 2007, 1).

Secretary of Foreign Affairs Edwin Pitman resigned from his post after fifteen years of service (CIN, 14 Nov 2007, 1). To the surprise of many, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wilkie Rasmussen selected fellow lawyer and former British honorary representative Mike Mitchell to succeed Pitman (CIN, 16 Jan 2008, 1). Public criticism emerged over the appointment because Mitchell is only a permanent resident, not a Cook Islander (CIN, 17 Jan 2008, 4). This was especially troubling as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for immigration, and controls the process for issuing permanent-resident status. It was noted that Mitchell’s expertise lay in areas other than foreign affairs, and Cook Islanders were insulted that qualified local candidates were not considered (CIN, 19 Jan 2008, 1, 4). Mitchell reviewed the Cook Islands’ overseas offices, and after determining that the consulate in Hawai’i was no longer justified, it was closed (CIN, 1 March 2008, 1).

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References

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FRENCH POLYNESIA

With three changes of governments, political instability in French Polynesia increased further during the period under review. Reform of the country’s political system and fresh elections, both unilaterally imposed by Paris, served to further aggravate the situation. Meanwhile, the local political scene was being reconfigured, with once staunchly pro-French leader Gaston Flosse allying himself with his pro-independence archrival Oscar Temaru, while many of Flosse’s former allies formed a heterogeneous pro-French coalition under Gaston Tong Sang.

In mid-July, the governing pro-French coalition under President Tong Sang, formed in late December 2006 out of Flosse’s Tahoenaa Huiraatira (People’s Rally) party and several splinter groups opposed to the previous pro-independence president, Oscar Temaru, broke apart after barely six months in existence. An internal power struggle between Flosse and Tong Sang had been going on for several months, but it escalated during Tong Sang’s visit to Paris in early July. Tong Sang and his delegation met French President Nicolas Sarkozy...