RAPA NUI

The year under review was marked by heavy political upheavals on Rapa Nui that were still unfolding at the time of this writing. A very successful protest action in August 2009 initiated a process of limiting immigration, while a historic change of political leadership in Chile in early 2010 caused a reconfiguration of local politics through the controversial appointment of former Mayor Petero Edmunds as governor. This in turn precipitated a far-reaching and ongoing political crisis.

The review period started rather calmly. On 11–14 July, the French warship Prairial visited the Island in order to unload building materials for the establishment of a branch of the Alliance Française, an organization promoting French language and culture abroad, in Hanga Roa. This followed a visit by the French ambassador to Chile earlier in 2009 (French embassy in Chile website, undated article), an act symbolizing the normalization of Franco-Chilean relations regarding Rapa Nui, which was in the French colonial sphere of influence for two decades before being annexed by Chile in 1888.

In mid-July, a controversy arose over planning for the solar eclipse of 11 July 2010, named “Honu Eclipse” on the Island, for which all tourist accommodations were booked out a year in advance (RNJ, Oct 2009, 172). Since the event was expected to bring up to 30,000 tourists at one time, local authorities were very...
Concerned (ST, 3 Aug 2009). The polemics about the event increased as a group of Chilean promoters planned a techno dance festival during the eclipse, which gained the support of the Rapa Nui Parliament, the Island’s pro-independence body under its president, Leviante Araki; but no government entity authorized it. In a protest letter published online, Christian Moreno-Pakarati criticized Araki for his support of the event, arguing that tourists would come anyway to see the eclipse and that the planned festival would pose unnecessary risks for the Island’s historic monuments (TRN, 11 July 2009). After long hesitation, the governor’s office finally authorized the festival in May 2010 (La Tercera, 8 May 2010).

Even without the possible visitor overkill for the eclipse, the growth of tourism has reached extreme dimensions, with 64,495 visitors in 2008 (ST, 25 Aug 2009). This figure (which was then about twelve annual visitors per inhabitant and has been increasing at an annual growth rate of about 20 percent) now constitutes the highest per capita tourism rate in any Pacific Island entity,—more than twice that of Hawai’i, which held that distinction for decades. While many Islanders appreciate the economic benefits of tourism (since, unlike in other mass tourism destinations like Hawai’i and Guam, the visitor industry on Rapa Nui is almost completely in native hands), its recent exponential explosion has made more and more people concerned about its sustainability. Earlier estimates had set the Island’s carrying capacity at 20,000 yearly visitors (di Castri 2003, 45)—a figure now far surpassed.

Paralleling the visitor count, the number of cars on Rapa Nui is exploding as well: according to estimates, there are now up to four vehicles per inhabitant, which would mean over 19,000 total (RNJ, Oct 2009, 173). Though this estimate may seem too high, there is indeed frequent traffic congestion on the Island, and the density of vehicles in Hanga Roa is certainly extraordinarily high for such a small community.

During 2009, a second bank, Banco Santander, opened in Hanga Roa to compete with the hitherto monopoly-wielding Chilean State Bank (RNJ, Oct 2009, 171). While competition may bring more advantages for bank customers, the installation of such outsider-controlled businesses raises concerns among Rapanui who are worried about losing control over the Island’s economy.

On 5 August, virtually the entire community gathered at the Hanga Roa stadium to support the aspiring Rapanui national football team, cf Rapa Nui, in what was called by local media the “match of the century” against the popular professional Chilean team Colo-Colo. While cf Rapa Nui unsurprisingly lost the match, it did so with a rather fair score of 0 to 4, a very good showing for an amateur team playing for the first time against professionals (TRN, 5 Aug 2009; RNJ, Oct 2009, 171–172). More importantly from the point of view of political analysis, the match became a manifestation of an emerging Rapanui national consciousness. When the team as well as the spectators enthusiastically sang the Rapanui national anthem, “I Hē A Hotu Matu’a,” before the start, dozens of Rapanui
flags (but not a single Chilean one) could be seen proudly flying among the audience (YouTube 2009).

While aspirations for more political autonomy, if not independence, are thus clearly on the rise, the organic law bill for a special political status introduced by Chilean President Michelle Bachelet in July 2008, which in its current form is clearly insufficient but would nevertheless represent a small first step in the right direction, was dragging along in Chile’s Congress (for an evaluation of the bill, see Gonschor 2009, 172–174). By March 2009 the bill had not even passed in the Chamber of Deputies, let alone in the Senate, and since that time there has been no further action (Congress of the Republic of Chile website, accessed 17 Aug 2010). This incredibly slow legislative process further increased the frustration among Rapanui with the Chilean political system, especially compared with the French legislature, which introduced, debated, and passed a new, albeit controversial, organic law for neighboring French Polynesia within three months in late 2007.

What was most frustrating about the special status bill, however, was the total absence of measures to control immigration of Chilean nationals to the Island. The number of inhabitants has risen dramatically in the last few years, from 3,800 in 2002 to almost 5,000 today (PIR, 18 Aug 2010), and aboriginal Rapanui have not been in the majority since 2006 (RNJ, May 2006, 86). For many years, a large majority of Islanders have been asking the Chilean government to put in place immigration controls like those in Ecuador’s Galápagos Islands, but these requests have been to no avail.

It was not surprising then that more drastic actions of resistance followed. On 17 August, activists of the Rapanui Parliament—led by Leviante Araki as well as the two pro-independence members of the Easter Island Development Commission (CODEIPA), Mario Tuki and Raúl Teao—blocked the runway of the Island’s international airport with several cars and trucks, preventing flights to and from the Island, in order to protest against the unchecked growth of mass tourism and the ongoing unlimited immigration of Chilean settlers. Araki, Tuki, and Teao demanded that the Chilean government immediately initiate steps to control immigration; otherwise the occupation of the airport would go on (ST, 17 Aug 2009; GIP, 17 Aug 2009). In the event of continuing government inaction, Araki threatened to declare the Island independent. He said there was no problem with tourists as such, but there were big problems with people from the Chilean continent, some of them with criminal records, coming to stay on Rapa Nui (People’s Daily, 27 Aug 2009).

In a video conference, the activists reached an understanding with Chilean Undersecretary for the Interior Patricio Rosende, and they agreed to end the blockade when Rosende promised to enact measures of immigration control within twenty days. The leaders of the protest planned to fly to Santiago on the next scheduled flight to discuss with him the details of the immigration control regime. A group of women within the group, however, did not agree with the settlement and blocked the runway again in order to
prevent the delegation from leaving, arguing that the undersecretary should come to the Island and not vice versa. Rosende agreed with the request, and after forty hours, the blockade was ended (TRN, Aug 2009).

In the following week, Undersecretary Rosende traveled to Rapa Nui and was presented with a proposed immigration control scheme, which had been elaborated in community workshops prior to his arrival. The government promised to make this proposal into law as soon as possible (GIP, 21 Aug 2009; EMOL, 23 Aug 2009; ST, 25 Aug 2009). The ongoing negotiations about the proposal overlapped with the 121st anniversary of the Island’s annexation by Chile on 9 September, which was as usual commemorated by the Chilean government and a few elite Rapanui leaders (La Nación, special edition, 25 Sept 2009).

On 15 September the immigration-control system elaborated in the workshops and negotiations was enacted by decree by Undersecretary Rosende. According to the scheme, all visitors to Rapa Nui would be required to fill out a form declaring the duration of and reason for their visit. In a dramatic action, Rosende personally handed the first forms to passengers bound to Rapa Nui at Santiago Airport (TRN, Sept 2009).

However, an unidentified plaintiff filed a judicial complaint against this measure. The Supreme Court of Chile ruled on 7 October that the scheme was unconstitutional, as the constitution guarantees free movement and choice of residence to citizens throughout the national territory (El Mostrador, 7 Oct 2009). The government initially complied with the ruling by declaring the filing of the form to be voluntary (ST, 8 Oct 2009), but the possibility of further acts of civil disobedience indicated that this could not be a permanent solution. The government eventually decided to hold a plebiscite on the Island and then amend the Chilean constitution accordingly (TRN, Oct 2009).

Conveniently, on 15 September 2009, Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries entered into force in Chile, since Chile had ratified it a year before (Fondo Indígena, 19 Aug 2008; Government of Chile 2008). The application of this convention to Rapa Nui is generally problematic, since the Rapanui are not an indigenous people within an independent country but rather the people of a dependent territory—an important distinction in international law. But in the case of the immigration dilemma, the convention turned out to be indeed helpful. According to the convention: “Special measures shall be adopted as appropriate for safeguarding the persons, institutions, property, labour, cultures and environment of the peoples concerned,” and “governments shall . . . consult the peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever consideration is being given to legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly” (ILO 1989, articles 4.1 and 6.1a). Thus a referendum limited to ethnic Rapanui concerning the immigration issue could be justified.

In the plebiscite, which took place
on 24 October, an overwhelming majority (96.3 percent of the 706 participants) voted in favor of amending the Chilean constitution to enable immigration controls in Rapa Nui (GIP, 26 Oct, 5 Nov 2009). However, many of the 1,300 eligible voters had chosen not to participate, probably because members of the Parliament had expressed their doubts about the process (EMOL, 24 Oct 2009).

Referring to the referendum results, as well as the precedents in the Ecuadorian Galápagos Islands and the Colombian islands of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina (to which Ecuadorian or Columbian citizens, respectively, can migrate only with special permissions), President Bachelet introduced a bill for a constitutional amendment in Congress on 28 October. According to the bill, the Special Territories of Easter Island and Juan Fernández, because of their specific geographic circumstances, would be excepted from the general right of free movement and residence within Chile (Government of Chile 2009; SUBDERE, 6 Nov 2009).

Unsurprisingly, the bill moved very slowly through Congress. Only on 27 July 2010 did the Senate pass it, and now it must go through the Chamber of Deputies. The slow legislative process was again creating frustration, which would lead to more serious unrest later in 2010.

Near the end of 2009, however, attention turned to Chilean national politics as President Bachelet’s term in office drew to its end (Chilean law prohibits consecutive terms in office) and the presidential elections became hotly contested. Overall, election results on the island closely matched the overall results in Chile. In the first round on 13 December, among the two leading candidates, Sebastián Piñera of the right-wing opposition Alianza coalition led the vote with 44.05 percent in Chile and 45.25 percent on Rapa Nui; Eduardo Frei of the hitherto governing center-left Concertación, who had been president from 1994 to 2000, received 29.60 percent on the continent and also came in second on Rapa Nui with 26.05 percent. In the runoff between the leading contenders on 17 January, Piñera won a close race on the continent with 51.60 percent, while on Rapa Nui he received a much higher percentage of the vote (60.19 percent) (Ministry of Interior, Government of Chile).

Concurrently with the first round, national elections were also held for senators and deputies in Congress. For both purposes, Rapa Nui is part of a larger Valparaíso constituency with hundreds of thousands of voters, so the Island’s votes are almost irrelevant for these elections. Islanders have often complained about the absence of separate representation for the Island in Congress, but so far to no avail. Congressional elections thus do not usually attract major interest of local politics. Notable, however, was the large number of Islander votes for Senate candidate Joaquín Lavín, due to his personal popularity with many Rapanui, including some of the pro-independence leaders. Nevertheless, Lavín did not win in the wider constituency.

The victory of Piñera, the first right-wing president to be democratically elected in post-Pinochet Chile, marked a historic change for Chile and had important implications for
the political scene on Rapa Nui as well. Ever since the Concertación had started ruling Chile in 1990, the Rapanui elite closely collaborated with it, while the local support for the Alianza has come at least partly from the local opposition of Rapanui nationalists. This seemed at times odd, since one would expect the Chilean right to have less understanding for Rapanui nationalism than the left. However, one should avoid seeing Polynesian political affiliations from Western ideological perspectives, since personal relations are usually far more important than ideology (Pakarati-Novoa 2009, 200)—a situation that parallels attitudes toward metropolitan politics in other Pacific dependent territories such as French Polynesia or Wallis and Futuna.

In this sense, the election results on Rapa Nui not only reflected general trends in Chilean politics (which is certainly an important aspect, since about half of the local voters are Chilean settlers), but the above average vote for Piñera could also be interpreted as a rejection of the local elite affiliated with the Concertación. In particular, the popularity of the two former mayors of Rapa Nui, Petero Edmunds and Alberto Hotus (who claims to be the president of the Rapanui Council of Elders), has been decreasing for some time.

During the transition between Piñera’s election and his inauguration, the construction of the new hospital, which had been planned for several years, finally started (GIP, 22 Feb 2010). Shortly thereafter, another referendum under the parameters of ILO Convention 169 solved a long-standing controversy on the Island: For more than two years, the Italian foundation Mare Nostrum and the French fashion company Louis Vuitton had planned an exhibition featuring a Rapanui mo’ai (megalithic sculpture) in the center of Paris. The project gained the support of the chairman of the Chamber of Tourism, Edgar Hereveri, but many people protested against it, worrying about possible damages to the mo’ai during transport. In a plebiscite organized by the Chilean National Council of Monuments on 1 March, a large majority (89 percent) among the 883 participants rejected the project (CNMC, undated article; Tahitipresse, 9 Apr 2009; RNJ, May 2010, 78)—setting a precedent on how to responsibly handle similar projects in the future.

After his inauguration on 11 March, President Piñera appointed new governors for all Chilean provinces (Subdere, 17 March 2009). While local representatives of the Alianza had presented Piñera with a list of five Rapanui right-wing politicians to choose from, the president ignored their wishes and instead appointed former Mayor Petero Edmunds to succeed Bachelet-appointee Carolina Hotu as the Island’s governor (RNJ, May 2010, 75). Since Edmunds is a member of the Concertación, his appointment caused widespread consternation and resentment among both Alianza members in Chile and local representatives of the right-wing coalition such as Amelia Olivares and Julio Araki, who felt betrayed by Piñera’s choice (La Segunda, 17 March 2010; ST, 19 March 2010). Many of them had heavily criticized Edmunds during his fourteen years as mayor from 1994 to 2008, with
charges of corruption and either an overly anti-Chilean or overly pro-Chilean attitude, depending on their individual perspectives (Radio Biobio, 16 March 2010). As an expression of their indignation, activists resigned their Alianza memberships and burned Chilean flags and posters of Piñera in front of the governor’s office (Las Últimas Noticias, 22 March 2010; RNJ, May 2010, 75).

Piñera was unimpressed by the protests and maintained his choice. His appointment of Edmunds might have been a tactical move to tie Edmunds to the new Chilean government and thereby simultaneously split the local elite of Concertación supporters and prevent a possible radicalization of Edmunds. Edmunds, as both a charismatic and an opportunistic local politician, could easily be imagined turning into a pro-independence leader if no longer backed by metropolitan Chile, similar to the French-puppet-turned-Tahitian-nationalist Gaston Flosse in Tahiti. In addition, Piñera probably had no real trust in the local Alianza supporters, since many of them are close to the pro-independence Rapanui Parliament. In the end, however, the move backfired, and the appointment actually provoked a new surge of Rapanui nationalism, as the next months would show.

Since Piñera would not retract Edmunds’s appointment, the protests against the governor went on. The demonstrations in front of the governor’s office turned into a permanent occupation including tents and placards. Later, representatives of the protestors met with Undersecretary of the Interior Rodrigo Ubilla in Santiago to formally protest Edmunds’s appointment, again to no avail.

Among the charges against Edmunds (besides his being from the wrong party) was alleged corruption during his time in office as mayor from 1994 to 2008, including his involvement in controversial investment projects and allegations of fraudulent use of the Island’s tax-free status to obtain free licenses for vehicles circulating on the continent (The Clinic, 1 April 2010; TRN, June 2010).

By mid-May, the protest had been going on for two months. In an interview with a Chilean newspaper, both Enzo Muñoz (a non-Rapanui member of Alianza who represents the Island in the Regional Council of Valparaíso) and Rapanui Parliament-affiliated CODEIPA member Raúl Teao once again denounced the governor and demanded his resignation (EMOL, 13 May 2010). It was also alleged that Edmunds, as current governor, was involved in some land-dealing schemes, and that this might have been part of the deal of his appointment (La Nación, 3 Aug 2010; TRN, Aug 2010).

As the protest continued, the connections among the protest leaders, with their seemingly different agendas, must be recalled. For example, Julio Araki (one of the leaders of the local Alianza who ran against Edmunds for mayor in 2004 and whom some have considered a candidate to replace Edmunds as governor) is the brother of the president of the Rapanui Parliament, Leviante Araki (TRN, Aug 2010). While initially ambiguous, the focus of the anti-Edmunds protest gradually shifted from that of Chilean right-wingers objecting to the appointment of a governor from an opposing
party to a Rapanui nationalist uprising against the Chilean state as a whole, as the protests would later expand to other properties throughout Hanga Roa in late July (TRN, August 2010). At the same time, Parliament activists came under fire for allegedly damaging a mo’ai while seizing the equipment of a team of archaeologists who were conducting research on the statue, apparently without community approval. Parliament denied the accusations and said it was the archaeologists who caused the damage (EMOL, 11 May 2010; TRN, June 2010).

In June, the stalemate between Governor Edmunds and the protestors had still not been resolved. On the contrary, his opponents were increasingly and vociferously demanding not simply his resignation but also independence for the Island from Chile, while both Edmunds and the Piñera government remained stubborn. Meanwhile, the Riroroko family, preferring not to get involved in the controversy, canceled the annual commemoration of their ancestor, the Island’s last king, Riro Kāinga, who was assassinated in the 1890s for his anti-colonial resistance and whose remains have rested since 2006 in a monument bearing his bust in the center of the park where the protests were taking place (TRN, June 2010).

The period under review ended with people both excitedly and anxiously waiting for the event of the year, the first full solar eclipse on the Island for more than a thousand years (and the anticipated record visitor arrivals). Meanwhile, political tensions were continuously increasing between the Chilean State and Governor Edmunds on one side and their local opponents on the other. By August 2010 these tensions would lead to one of the most serious political crises on Rapa Nui in the contemporary era.

LORENZ GONSCHOR

References
French Embassy in Chile website. http://www.france.cl
gip, Gobernación de la Isla de Pascua (Governor’s office of Easter Island Province). Various monthly news items. http://www.gobernacionisladepascua.gov.cl
--- 2009. Mensaje No. 1487-357. Mensaje de S. E. La Presidenta de la República con el que se inicia un proyecto de reforma constitucional que modifica el artículo 126 bis de la constitución política, sobre territorios especiales de Isla de Pascua y Archipiélago Juan Fernández. (Message No. 1487-357. Message of H.E. the President of the Republic through which is initiated a constitutional reform that modifies article 126 of the political constitution, regarding special territories of Easter Island and Juan Fernández Archipelago). Document dated 28 October 2009; formal entry to Congress dated 6 November 2009. Posted on Chilean Congress website http://sil.congreso.cl/cgi-bin/sil_abredocumentos.pl?1,7152 [accessed 10 August 2010].

---


---


---


---


---

RNJ, Rapa Nui Journal. Bi-annual academic and news journal. Los Osos, California.

http://www.islandheritage.org/rnj.html


http://www.santiagotimes.cl

---


TRN, Te Rapa Nui. Sporadically updated Internet news site. Hanga Roa.

http://www.rapanui.co.cl/