Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2011
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French Polynesia

The period under review was not particularly rich in new events. While no economic recovery was in sight, local politicians, fed by French subsidies, continued their games of making and unmaking majorities in the Assembly of French Polynesia, culminating in the eleventh change of government since 2004. The only possibly interesting development is that the new pro-independence majority now wants to internationalize the country’s problems and get it out of the grip of Paris.

As the review period started, the ongoing political instability continued to worsen as President Tong Sang’s minority government became more and more immobilized. Tong Sang had been leading a coalition government between his own To Tatou Aia (Our Country) party and Gaston Flosse’s Tahoeraa Huiraatira (People’s Rally) since November 2009, but the coalition virtually broke apart in April 2010. However, there had not been a motion of no confidence against Tong Sang because Tahoeraa could not agree on a common platform with the opposition Union Pour La Démocratie (UPLD, Union for Democracy), led by Oscar Temaru. Cabinet ministers from Tahoeraa refused to resign, even though the party leadership claimed Tahoeraa to be an opposition party. During a budgetary debate on 2 August, Tahoeraa representatives charged Tong Sang with incompetency to lead the country and called on him to resign (TP, 2 Aug 2010).

Tahoeraa’s confusing attitude of attacking the president and demanding his resignation, while at the same time allowing its members to keep their cabinet portfolios, can only be understood by looking at the peculiarities of French Polynesia’s political system. As long as Tong Sang did not resign, he could only be overthrown by a constructive vote of no confidence, which would require an overall majority and entail the automatic election of a successor. A resignation, on the other hand, would provoke a new presidential election, which could take up to three rounds of voting. In this scenario, Flosse, through clever tactics, might have had a chance to become president once more, since a relative majority would be sufficient in the third round (see articles 1 and 5 of the 2007 Organic Law of French Polynesia).

While the stalemate continued at home, the battleground for Tahitian politics was temporarily shifted overseas. During the annual Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Port Vila, Vanuatu, on 3–6 August, Vice President Edouard Fritch asked that his country finally be granted full membership. After having been granted observer status in 2004, French Poly-
nesia became an associated member in 2006, which Fritch considered an unjust, second-class status since it precluded the country’s representatives from participating in some of the Forum’s important political and economic discussions. The request for full membership was denied by the majority of Forum member countries because, according to the Forum’s statutes, full membership is limited to independent or fully self-governing countries (such as those in free association), while French Polynesia is considered only a partially autonomous territory under French sovereignty. Assembly Speaker Oscar Temaru, who also attended the Forum meeting, underlined that as long as the country was not independent, full membership was not possible (TP, 4 Aug, 8 Aug 2010). In this sense, Fritch and the other pro-French politicians have been acting hypocritically—at home they staunchly refuse independence from France while at international meetings they act as if their country is a sovereign state.

At the same time, irresponsible behavior had been common in domestic issues as well. In mid-August, the employees of the municipal administration of Teva I Uta on Tahiti’s south shore went on strike because UPLD Mayor Tina Cross had demanded that her employees accept a reduction in salaries after misspending by the previous Tahoeraa municipal administration had brought Teva I Uta to the brink of bankruptcy (TPM, Sept 2010). It was nearly three months before the conflict was resolved and municipal services resumed on 3 October (TPM, Nov 2010).

A few days later, on 5 October, the assembly passed a law prohibiting outsider companies from establishing mobile telephone services in the country. This protected the monopoly of the local Postal and Telecommunications Service, which has led to French Polynesia’s mobile phone rates being among the most expensive in the world (TPM, Nov 2010). When the French State Council declared the law unconstitutional on 7 February 2011, Ia Mana Te Nunaa, one of UPLD’s constituent parties, characterized the council’s decision as an act of colonialism (TP, 8 Feb 2011).

On 15–17 October, French Minister of Overseas Territories Marie-Luce Penchard visited the country. One of her agenda items was to discuss proposed changes to the election mode for the next assembly elections, but the changes were staunchly rejected by the three main local political parties, while a few hundred demonstrators demanded immediate early elections. In an interview before her departure, she was quoted as saying that local politicians give her a headache (TPM, Nov 2010).

Since local politics give headaches to others besides Mme Penchard, more and more people are pursuing alternatives to the current official political system. One alternative is the creation of self-proclaimed governments. The most colorful and controversial among these, named “Hau Pakumotu,” once again made headlines when its “king” was crowned in front of the assembly in July (TPM, Oct 2010). In October, its adherents also occupied a property in Outumaoro, Punaauia, on Tahiti’s west coast, with their uniformed militia intimidating other claimants to the property (TP, 18 Oct). The month of
October also saw the birth of another royalist political movement, led by Gaston Tetuanui, demanding the formation of an autonomous entity in the Leeward Islands and the creation of a “Kingdom of Hawaiki Nui,” thus combining the popular themes of royal restoration and outer island secession into one movement (*TPM*, Nov 2010).

The latter theme, outer-island autonomy from “Tahitian imperialism,” received a new boost with the creation of a “Community of Municipalities” in the Marquesas Islands, an initiative by the six municipalities in the archipelago to create a common structure in order to facilitate direct negotiations with Paris and bypass bureaucracy on the country level. On 17 December, Joseph Kaiha, the mayor of Ua Pou, was elected president of the community (*TPM*, Jan 2011).

On 24 October, the new territorial hospital in Taaone, in the city of Pirae east of Papeete, was inaugurated after nine years of construction. By late November, all patients were transferred from the old Mamao hospital in Papeete. With an overall floor surface of 65,000 square meters, 546 beds, ten inner courtyards, and a giant glass-covered hall twenty-three meters high, the complex in Taaone is one of the largest hospitals in the Pacific. The hospital was one of the prestige projects of former President Flosse, whose administration had begun construction of the project in 2001. Since then, however, construction had been slowed many times because the country government had not been able to afford the high costs and the French government was at first reluctant to step in to cover the difference. Altogether, construction of the hospital cost about 40 billion CFP francs (approximately US$400 million), an enormous sum for the small country. After they had already staged a protest in front of the presidential palace in July 2010 following the inauguration, several construction companies set up protest billboards at the entrance of the hospital because the country government had not paid their bills yet (*TPM*, Aug 2010; *TP*, 25 Oct 2010).

Critics say that the maintenance costs for the huge complex will be so high that the country government will need more subsidies from Paris in order to cover them. Furthermore, the hospital’s energy supply depends entirely on external power sources, as no one thought to cover the gigantic roof with solar cells or to use the cold water of the nearby ocean as coolant for the air conditioning system (*TPM*, Nov 2010). More generally speaking, it is quite problematic that the current health policy of the country government focuses almost entirely on Tahiti Island, where cutting-edge medical technology is made available in a giant hospital, while medical care on the outer islands often remains precarious.

Another improvement in infrastructure occurred on 1 September, when the underwater cable between Tahiti and Hawai‘i, named Hōnōtua, was put into service, enabling high-speed Internet access for French Polynesia (*TPM*, Oct 2010). However, in mid-March 2011 the cable project also led to a judicial investigation of various politicians and administrators, including President Tong Sang, because there were irregularities in the awarding of the contract to telecommunications company Alcatel (*TPM*, April 2011).
But there was yet another, more severe scandal. Reynald Temarii, the vice president of the Fédération Internationale du Football Association (FIFA [soccer]), was suspended from office on 17 October 2010 because he was under investigation for corruption. Temarii, as well as the Nigerian Amos Adamu, FIFA executive board members for Oceania and Africa respectively, were charged with attempting to sell their votes for the 2018 Football World Cup host country decision. Journalists from the London Times posing as American lobbyists had asked Temarii how much it would cost to convince him to vote for the United States, and he had suggested a sum of several million dollars. Even though the secretly recorded interview reveals that Temarii did not want to take the bribe personally but rather have it invested into the comparatively poor Oceania Football Federation, it was clearly a case of illegal bribery.

Former professional football player Temarii had served then President Gaston Flosse in various positions since 1991, had founded the Taheraa youth organization Jeun’Orange, and was cabinet minister for youth and sports from 1998 to 2004. After Flosse lost power in 2004, Temarii founded his own splinter political party but then left local politics when he was offered a high position in FIFA. In January 2010 he was promoted to FIFA vice president, the first representative of Oceania ever to hold that position. It goes without saying that this was the climax of a brilliant career envied by many a Tahitian, which made his irresponsible behavior all the more saddening (TPM, Nov 2010). On 18 November, FIFA decided to permanently remove him from the executive board, suspend him for one year from all sports activities, and fine him 5,000 Swiss francs (about US$5,675) (TPM, Dec 2010).

On 1 December, an opinion poll revealed that 97 percent of the population was unsatisfied with the political situation, 90 percent had no trust in any of the current politicians, and 57 percent wanted early elections in order to replace them with different leaders as well as a referendum on independence within the next five years (TPM, Jan 2011).

The New Year started with a personnel change in the local representation of the French government. High Commissioner Adolphe Colrat, in office since July 2008, left his position on 7 January 2011 and returned to France to assume another administrative post. He was replaced by Richard Didier, who was inaugurated on 22 January. Since Didier was an advisor of former French President Jacques Chirac (a personal friend and sponsor of Gaston Flosse), speculations arose that his appointment was part of a still-functioning Chirac-Flosse support network (TPM, Feb 2011).

The Union Pour La Démocratie, on the other hand, has its French supporters as well. On 23 January, former French Minister of Overseas Territories Christian Paul visited Tahiti to renew the convention of partnership between his French Socialist Party and Temaru’s pro-independence Tavini Huiraatira (People’s Servant) party, the leading component of UPLD (TPM, Feb 2011).

Meanwhile, judicial investigations and trials of various past corruption
scandals continued throughout the review period. Former directors of the territorial television station TNTV, Eric Monod and Loïc Brigato, were sentenced to suspended prison terms and fines for misuse of company property on 10 August (TPM, Sept 2010).

The main targets of judicial activity, however, were the numerous misdemeanors of former President Flosse. The investigations received a new twist in January, when Oscar Temaru and his attorney, Stanley Cross, surprisingly withdrew their earlier complaint that a presidential intelligence unit that Flosse had established in violation of French law had spied on them and thus invaded their privacy (NT, 5 Jan 2011; DT, 8 Jan 2011). Fears arose that the whole affair would be buried because of Flosse’s still-influential protection networks (TPM, March 2011). However, Annie Rousseau and journalist Alex du Prel, two of the other original plaintiffs, refused to withdraw their suit, and the court announced that it would pursue investigations (TPM, April 2011). On 18 April, another trial started in the Papeete Court against Flosse and eighty-six co-defendants for so-called fictional employments during Flosse’s semi-authoritarian presidency in the late 1990s and early 2000s (TPM, May 2011). While Flosse has so far politically survived all trials, another leading politician, Émile Vernaudon, the former mayor of Mahina on Tahiti’s east coast, was indefinitely removed from politics, receiving a sentence both literally by the judiciary and figuratively by the voters. While serving as minister for sports, postal services, and telecommunications in Oscar Temaru’s cabinet between 2004 and 2006, Vernaudon had embezzled about 170 million CFP francs (about US$1.7 million) from the postal budget for private purposes. During the last general municipal elections in March 2008, Vernaudon had been reelected mayor in absentia while in detention awaiting trial. One year later, in another corruption affair of a smaller scale, he was sentenced to a suspended jail term, which removed him from office. When his probation term expired in late 2010, several of his party’s municipal councilors resigned in order to provoke a special election so that Vernaudon could be reelected to the council and regain the mayoralty. However, during the campaign in mid-January 2011, Vernaudon was convicted of embezzlement, sentenced to five years in prison, and sent to jail immediately (TP, 18 Jan 2011). A Court of Appeal confirmed the sentence on 23 June (TPM, Aug 2011). The special municipal elections on 30 January and 6 February were won by a non-party-affiliated list, and their leading candidate, Patrice Jamet, was elected mayor by the newly constituted municipal council. Vernaudon’s list came in third, behind the local Tahoeraa list of Nicolas Sanquer (TP, 6 Feb 2011). Evidently, the people of Mahina have had enough of their formerly popular mayor’s escapades, but besides this purely local interpretation, the election results were also significant as an indication of a general dissatisfaction with the traditional party system. By voting for an independent list, Mahina’s citizens rejected not only Vernaudon but also all the political parties represented in the assembly.
Another scandal made headlines in mid-January when the president of the University of French Polynesia, Tahitian linguist Louise Peltzer, was accused of plagiarism because parts of her 1999 essay “Des Langues et des Hommes” (Languages and People) were found to be remarkably similar to the French translation of the 1993 book *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* (The Search for the Perfect Language in the European Culture) by Italian author Umberto Eco. Peltzer first reacted defensively and charged her critics with racial prejudice against her as the first Tahitian at the helm of the university, but after she lost the confidence of most of the faculty, Peltzer resigned on 1 April (*TPM*, May 2011). Eventually, archeologist Eric Conte was elected to succeed her (*TP*, 23 June 2011).

As the New Year progressed, the political crisis worsened. By February 2011, the political stalemate had gone on for more than nine months with no end in sight. Tong Sang was still president but leading a minority government with no chance to pass any legislation in the assembly. Since the opposition UPLD as well as the semi-opposition Tahoeraa refused to endorse the president’s 2011 budget proposal, Tong Sang suggested dissolution of the assembly and fresh elections to the French government, but at the same time kept refusing to resign (*TP*, 11 Feb 2011).

Because the 2007 modification of the Organic Law of French Polynesia provides severe consequences if the assembly does not pass the annual budget by March each year (see article 34, section II, 2007 Organic Law of French Polynesia), pressure on the representatives increased. Finally, on 20 February, a modified version of the budget proposal was passed by a solid majority of 43 votes out of a total of 57 assembly members. This majority included UPLD and Tahoeraa, as well as Ia Ora Te Fenua (May the Land Live, a splinter group led by Jean-Christophe Bouissou that had earlier broken away from To Tatou Aia), while the minority government caucus of To Tatou Aia abstained (*TP*, 20 Feb 2011).

In a press conference, Tong Sang denounced the assembly vote, arguing that according to the Organic Law a budget vote could only be legitimate with the president’s approval. Therefore, the French State Council (the highest court of France) was asked for its opinion (*PIR*, 28 Feb 2011). Without waiting for the court’s decision, Tong Sang issued a decree that published his budget proposal in the official bulletin as the actual 2011 government budget. By enacting a budget by executive decree, Tong Sang clearly overstepped his authority, and this unconstitutional act was the final nail in the coffin for his government. When five of his cabinet ministers, including Vice President Fritch and the other ministers from Tahoeraa, refused to endorse his budgetary decree, the president summarily dismissed them on 28 February. Among those dismissed was Minister of Economic Reconversion Teva Rohfritsch, who received the news of his immediate dismissal while representing French Polynesia at a conference of European Union–affiliated Overseas Territories in New Caledonia. This did not help to improve the international image of the country, already tarnished by years
of political instability (TP, 28 Feb 2011).

Now reduced to a splinter group with only a handful of supporters in the assembly, Tong Sang’s minority government was still holding power since the opposition parties remained unable to find a common candidate and form a common platform that would enable a constructive no-confidence vote. During the last weeks of March, however, UPLD, with the largest caucus in the assembly, carefully maneuvered behind the scenes to gather a bare majority of its own, without having to rely on the two other, pro-French opposition groups, Tahoeraa and Ia Ora Te Fenua. A motion of no confidence was introduced on 24 March (TP, 24 March 2011). This was made possible when a few To Tatou Aia representatives from the outer islands switched sides. In order to consolidate the new majority ideologically, UPLD required its new adherents to sign a declaration demanding French Polynesia’s reinscription on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories (from which France had unilaterally removed the country in 1947), a core element of UPLD’s platform. Following negotiations that took place until the last minute, the political stalemate of more than a year was finally over, at least for the time being, when Tong Sang was overthrown on 1 April in a no-confidence motion and replaced once more by Oscar Temaru by a bare majority of twenty-nine votes (TP, 1 April 2011).

On 6 April, Temaru presented his new cabinet of eleven ministers, most of them UPLD members as well as several newly “converted” former To Tatou Aia members from the outer islands. The new vice president is Antony Geros, who had already held the position in earlier Temaru-led cabinets (TP, 6 April 2011). On 14 May, UPLD caucus chairman Jacqui Drollet was elected Temaru’s successor as Speaker of the assembly (TPM, May 2011).

This change of government marked the end of Tong Sang’s third term in office since 2006 and the beginning of Temaru’s fifth term since 2004. What is interesting about this most recent act in French Polynesia’s political drama is the fact that the country is now headed for the first time by a government that has an explicit mandate to push for decolonization on the international level. Temaru’s earlier majorities had always failed in this respect because they included representatives opposed to independence who accused Temaru of breaking his promise to them to remain neutral in the decolonization question in exchange for their political support.

Another project of the new Temaru government is the introduction of a progressive income tax, which is currently nonexistent (TP, 4 April 2011). This would be an important step to curb the drastically increasing social inequalities in the country. But this plan is just as bold politically as the decolonization initiative, since politicians and government officials are the main profiteers of both the French government subsidies and the current unjust taxation system.

During the period under review, the government took the first steps to curb its spending by selling off unnecessary prestige objects. On 15 October, the Tong Sang government sold the historic Rocklands Hostel in Auckland to
a New Zealand real estate agency for NZ$5.1 million (US$4.2 million), much less than the purchase price paid by an earlier Temaru government in 2005 (TP, 15 Oct 2010). On 10 March, the presidential airplane, bought by the Flosse government in the early 2000s and thus nicknamed “Air Flosse One,” was sold to a European syndicate on behalf of the Bhutanese national airline Druk Air for 6.2 million euros (about US$7.5 million) (TPM, April 2011).

A more drastic step was taken by the new Temaru government when it decided to move the presidency out of the Flosse-era luxury presidential palace and into an older government building and to lease the palace to businesses. Vice President Geros stated that a colonial-style palace did not suit modern Tahiti and that when he and his colleagues entered the palace, they felt out of place. According to unconfirmed rumors, a Chinese bank and a hotel chain were interested in leasing the building (TPM, May 2011). Following this trend, in late April, the French Development Agency told the French Polynesia government to sell the building that houses its office in Paris as well; otherwise the country would no longer receive loans from the agency (TPM, June 2011). While all of these measures may have important symbolic meaning, it would be far more prudent in light of the country’s disastrous economic and financial situation for the administration to cut the excessive salaries of politicians as well as those of countless officials in the numerous and often unnecessary and incompetent government departments, since the sum of all these salaries by far exceeds the maintenance cost for a few pretentious buildings. The only politician who has dared to take initiative in that direction thus far is Sabrina Birk (UPLD), who threatened to resign in protest of her colleagues’ refusal to enact drastic pay cuts. She decided to stay in the assembly but chose to accept less than one third of her monthly salary of 630,000 CFP francs (about US$6,300) and donate the rest to a children’s aid organization. She also announced that she would pay her staff the same salary as herself and also make a charitable donation out of the rest of the 580,000 CFP francs she receives monthly to pay staff members (TPM, June–July 2011).

On 19 April, Papeete saw another union-led demonstration against the failure of successive governments to improve the economic situation. The whole protest, attended by about 2,000 participants, was rather hypocritical, however, since it was once more led by people who benefit the most from the system (TP, 12 April 2011). A few days before, assembly member Hiro Tefaarere, a former union official with a notorious past as a political turncoat, surprisingly told the naked truth on the floor of the assembly, denouncing both politicians and union officials and warning that the system could not go on like this (TP, 12 April 2011).

At the same time, the economic and social decay of the country is becoming more and more visible. Not only has the number of homeless in the streets of Papeete increased dramatically (TPM, May 2009), one can also see more and more abandoned buildings in downtown Papeete, some corners of which are
beginning to look like ghost towns. The reason is usually property owners’ lack of funds due to the bad economic situation (NT, 28 Dec 2010).

With no solution for the economic crisis in sight, it is not surprising that more and more people are leaving the country. Due to the artificial economic growth brought about by French subsidies in the past, French Polynesia used to be among the Pacific Island entities with the lowest number in the diaspora, but this is slowly changing. Tahitian expatriate communities are beginning to grow, mainly in New Caledonia, France, and francophone Canada (TPM, Aug 2010), but also in New Zealand, Hawai’i, and the US West Coast.

One has to wonder why the local politicians, with quite a large amount of policy-making powers at their disposal, have been preoccupied with power struggles and have completely failed to make any significant improvements in the economic and social fields over the last couple of years. Attentively following the developments since the early 2000s, I have lately begun to speculate whether the irresponsible, and in the long run self-destructive behavior of the political elites might not be a kind of subconscious response to French colonial patronizing policies of the past and present. Since Tahitian politicians have been constantly treated like children (who are either to be repressed or to be spoiled), their reaction has indeed been to behave like children.

In this sense, the initiative of the new Temaru government to internationalize the issue by seeking to reinscribe the country on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories is a bold step. The opposition in the assembly, on the other hand, is running up against Temaru’s decolonization plans. When a resolution to support reinscription was introduced by the cabinet to the assembly committee on institutional issues, the three “autonomist” (ie, anti-independence) opposition caucuses of Tahoea, To Tatou Aia, and Ia Ora Te Fenua denounced the government’s plan in a joint press statement and announced that they would fiercely resist the passing of the resolution. This led to an adjournment of debate on the resolution on the assembly floor until mid-August (TP, 21 June 2011).

Despite claims by the “autonomists” to the contrary, colonialism is alive and well in French Polynesia. Nothing shows this more clearly than the French government’s policy toward the Tahitian language. In May 2011, the French ministry of education announced plans to abolish the CAPES (certificat d’aptitude au professeur de l’enseignement du second degré [certificate of ability to teach in secondary education]) diploma for the teaching of so-called regional languages (including Tahitian) by 2012. This could jeopardize the official position of the Tahitian language in French Polynesia’s education system, in which Tahitian can be chosen instead of a foreign language in collège and lycée (middle and high school) and in which Tahitian can be taken to satisfy the foreign language requirement in the baccalauréat (high school diploma). Representatives of various political parties, of the Maohi Protestant Church (the country’s largest denomination), and the Tahitian Academy (the language commission) were out-
raged over the plans. In early June, the Assembly of French Polynesia passed a unanimous resolution denouncing the education ministry’s plans and demanding to maintain the diploma. Speaker Jacqui Drollet stated that this was part of a colonial political strategy by the French government to further undermine Polynesian identity through language assimilation (TP, 14 June 2011). Senator Richard Tuheiava, one of the two representatives of the country in the French Senate, considered the plan to be contradictory to the French constitution (which since a 2008 amendment recognizes “regional languages”) as well as the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which France ratified in 2007 (TP, 30 May 2011). Led by the Tahitian Academy and the Maohi Protestant Church, hundreds demonstrated on June 26 in front of the Pouvanaa a Oopa monument in Papeete for the maintenance of the diploma (TP, 26 June 2011).

It is quite apparent that Tahitian and other Polynesian languages are indeed threatened. Already, most young people speak French more often and more fluently than they do Tahitian, as a recent study by a French scholar has shown (Ferment Mear 2010), and the French government’s colonialist policies are reinforcing the trend. On 6 October, the European Human Rights Court rejected a complaint by assembly member Sabrina Birk against an earlier French government ban on the official use of Tahitian in the assembly (TP, 6 Oct 2010).

A continuation of French colonialism is also apparent in the treatment of the victims of nuclear testing. Even though in 2010 France passed the so-called Morin Act, a law to enable the compensation of former test workers suffering from radiation-related illnesses, the law contains numerous bureaucratic hurdles that prevent many victims from receiving recognition of their sufferings and, as a result, adequate compensation. Local nuclear test victims' association Moruroa e Tatou repeatedly denounced the failings of the compensation process and demanded a revision of the Morin Act (TP, 17 Nov 2010, 30 June 2011).

Despite France’s continuing colonial policies, however, its long-term interests in the country are becoming more and more dubious. An indication of this is the continuing military pullout. At the end of 2010, the commander of military forces in French Polynesia, Rear Admiral Jérôme Régnier, announced that 1,000 positions, including 750 military personnel and 250 civilian employees, will be cut by 2016 (DT, 20 Dec 2010).

Finally, yet another change in the political system is under way. After consultation with some of the leading local politicians, French Minister for Overseas Territories Marie-Luce Penchard introduced into the French legislature a bill for a new amendment to the French Polynesia Organic Act of 2004. After some debate, it was passed by the French Senate on 31 May and was thereafter transferred to the National Assembly, the other legislative chamber of the French Republic, where it was adopted at the end of June (TP, 30 June 2011). The bill proposes to restore the one-third-of-seats bonus for the leading party, which was part of the 2004 organic law but had been removed in the last amendment of 2007. The election mode in two
rounds, on the other hand, with a 12.5 percent threshold for admission to the second round, first introduced in 2007, will be retained. Besides, the six current constituencies are to be deleted and replaced with a unitary constituency with several sections. Furthermore, constructive no-confidence votes will henceforth require a 60 percent majority of representatives. All of these changes are supposed to create more solid majorities and thereby decrease the country’s chronic instability. Unlike the 2007 amendment, Penchard’s bill is not intended to lead to a dissolution of the assembly and early elections, but rather it is supposed to be applied to the next regular assembly elections in 2013 (RNZI, 1 June 2011; TP, 2 June 2011, 15 July 2011).

In French Polynesia, the bill met mixed reactions. Many Tahitian politicians favor the creation of a unitary constituency, since this would lead to a more appropriate representation of the political will of the country’s body politic. Representatives from the outer islands, on the other hand, criticized the deletion of the separate constituencies because they feared that this would lead to an even stronger dominance by Tahiti Island, which holds more than two-thirds of the country’s inhabitants, and further marginalize the outer islands. On 14 April, the Assembly of French Polynesia adopted a “reserved” (ie, neither for nor against, but skeptical) opinion on the bill, and the two French Polynesia deputies in the National Assembly both criticized the adopted text and called for further modifications (TP, 30 June 2011). Altogether, however, the local political scene reacted far less critically than in 2007 when Paris imposed the organic law reform against the explicit will of the assembly’s majority.

Leaving controversial politics aside and looking at some positive events in the cultural field, the period under review was also marked by milestones in the revival of traditional navigation. The race by two neo-traditional canoes to reach the 2010 Shanghai World Expo before its closing was won by neither team. One of the two canoes, O Tahiti Nui Freedom, reached Shanghai on November 22 after a voyage of 114 days. After leaving Tahiti on 11 July, the voyage led through the Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The goal of the voyage, led by Tahitian scientist Hiria Ottino, was to reversely duplicate the historic migration route of the Austronesian peoples—from southern China, through Taiwan and Southeast Asia, and into the insular Pacific—and thereby promote French Polynesia among the Expo visitors. Slowed by damage from several storms, the canoe arrived too late for the Expo, but the crew was nevertheless enthusiastically received by the Chinese authorities and greeted with a military honor guard in Shanwei Harbor, Guangdong (TPM, Dec 2010)

The voyage of more than 15,000 kilometers was one of the longest in the history of the modern revival of Polynesian navigation. The competing canoe, Upoo Tahiti, with owner Clément Pito and navigator Teiki Pambrun, was less fortunate. Pito and Pambrun, who had originally collaborated with Ottino on one single
project before having a falling out, chose a straight route through central Polynesia and Micronesia and decided to sail without an escort vessel or official permits. Unfortunately, damage and other problems ended the voyage in Tuvalu, where the canoe was abandoned, and the crew returned to Tahiti (TPM, Oct 2010).

Another highlight in Polynesian navigation took place when a fleet of seven neo-traditional canoes, named Tavaru 2011, sailed from French Polynesia to Hawai‘i between April and June 2011. The fleet, sponsored by German philanthropist Dieter Paulmann and his marine protection foundation Okeanos, consisted of the Tahitian canoe Faafaite, one canoe each from the Cook Islands, Sāmoa, and Fiji, two from Aotearoa/New Zealand, and one with a pan-Pacific crew. The canoes had first gathered on Fakarava atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago, then sailed to Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, and from there to Hilo on Hawai‘i Island, where they were enthusiastically greeted by Hawaiian religious and cultural leaders. The voyage of more than 4,000 kilometers between the Marquesas and Hawai‘i took the fleet only twelve days. After a tour of the Hawaiian Islands, the canoes plan to make a trip to the US West Coast and to hold a reunion in the Marquesas in November. Most significantly, Faafaite is the first neo-traditional Tahitian canoe to sail to Hawai‘i, a somewhat belated response to the famed voyage of the Hawaiian vessel Hōkūle‘a to Tahiti in 1976.

Besides these wonderful events, the country’s cultural scene suffered a terrible loss during the year under review. On 12 February, Jean-Marc Teraituatini Pambrun passed away in Paris at the age of fifty-seven. Pambrun was one of the most renowned contemporary Tahitian writers and artists. Among his numerous works are Le Sale Petit Prince (a collection of satirical short stories); Les Parfums du Silence (a play based on Paul Gauguin’s last years in the Marquesas Islands); and the novel Le Bambou Noir. Most of his literary works featured his own drawings. In 2006, Pambrun, a lifelong pro-independence activist, was appointed curator of the territorial museum, Musée de Tahiti et des Iles, in Punaauia by then President Oscar Temaru. As curator, Pambrun was responsible for a thorough renovation of the museum and several special exhibits featuring Polynesian artifacts from around the world. His last great literary work was a biography of famed Tahitian poet and filmmaker Henri Hiro (1944–1990), which came out in late 2010. Strictly following his will, Pambrun’s funeral on Moorea Island was a rare occurrence, as it was celebrated with purely traditional, non-Christian ceremonies (TPM, March 2011).

Besides Pambrun, a few other notable personalities passed away. Pierre Vérin, a former president of the University of French Polynesia, died in July 2010 at the age of seventy-eight. Vérin was a French linguist and anthropologist who had become famous for his research in the Austral islands (TPM, Aug 2010). On 14 August, Chinese-Tahitian painter François Teriitehau passed away at sixty-five (TPM, Sept 2011), and on 11 September, fisherman Tavae Raioaoa died at age sixty-four.
Raioaoa had become famous in 2002, when, following engine damage, he survived 118 days drifting on an open boat before reaching Aitutaki in the Cook Islands, where a museum was subsequently built in his honor. His adventure has also been told in a book published in French and Tahitian (TPM, Oct 2010). Finally, on 16 January 2011, René Calinaud, a former magistrate and legal expert on land tenure matters who had served on the bench since 1959, left this world at the age of eighty (TPM, Feb 2011).

On a final note, the Catholic Church, the country's second largest religious denomination, had an important change in leadership. On 31 March, Archbishop Hubert Coppenrath, in office since 1998, retired at the record age of eighty. In his stead, Pope Benedict XVI appointed Father Bruno Mai to serve as apostolic administrator of the archdiocese until a new archbishop is nominated (TPM, April 2011).

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References


MĀORI ISSUES

The year under review was one of shocking upheavals for Māori in more ways than one. In August and September 2010 we lost some key leaders. In September 2010, in February 2011, and in June 2011, Christchurch suffered a series of earthquakes that left many Māori families devastated and feeling abandoned as recovery aid passed them by. On the political scene, Prime Minister John Key finally got his wish when the Māori Party forced Hōne Harawira out, only to have Harawira win a by-election for his Taitokerau seat and return to Parliament as the leader of the new Mana Movement. But the most bewildering development was the Māori Party turning its back on its constituents and supporting the passage into law of the racist Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Bill.