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

**Cook Islands**

As the 49th year of Cook Islands “self-governing” in free association with New Zealand, the period under review has been characterized by a number of political ups and downs, culminating in a snap election with contested results and court action set to determine the outcome. The results highlight the need for reform to address the disparity of the value of a vote across the country. As 2014 is also the International Year of Small Islands Developing States, international and local attention is focused on the country’s development partnerships as it prepares to celebrate its unique form of sovereignty in 2015. Other issues this year revolved around a rollout of tax reforms, marine resources, and the management of the climate change–related drought in the southern group islands.

The Cook Islands continues to place priority on climate change and climate-related disaster risks, with a number of southern group islands “dealing with drought-like conditions after months without decent rainfall” (CIN, 16 Dec 2013). On Atiu, groundwater supplies were at critically low levels. These problems were further compounded with increased demands expected over the Christmas period and the drought conditions forecast to extend the dry season (CIN, 16 Dec 2013). With two water treatment plants and a desalination machine dispatched from Rarotonga, the New Zealand High Commission added its support by supplying one of the solar-powered water-treatment plants as part of a NZ$225,000 grant to support the Cook Islands drought response strategy. The strategy includes equipment, training, awareness raising, and water level monitoring and reporting (CIN, 31 Jan 2014). On a much larger scale, the NZ$60 million Cook Islands Water Partnership, or Te Mato Vai, linked to climate change, is intended to improve water supply and quality on Rarotonga. The initiative will refurbish water intakes, increase water storage and treatment, and replace ring mains and piping (CIN, 19 Oct 2013). Funding for the project has been raised, with NZ$22 million from the Cook Islands government, a NZ$15 million grant from New Zealand, and a NZ$23 million concessional loan from the People’s Republic of China. This jointly funded partnership has drawn international attention and is “believed to be a first for the emerging Asian country which has traditionally been known to deliver aid unilaterally” (CIN, 12 Sept 2013). Visiting researcher Philippa Brant of the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Australia suggested that because the Pacific faced no current military conflict, the Cook Islands was ideal for Beijing
to test out its new aid strategy while avoiding accusations of self-interest by allowing the Cook Islands and New Zealand to drive the project (CIN, 12 Sept 2013). Locally the project also drew attention through public meetings and consultations on the Water Master Plan. With construction due to start on 14 April 2014, a petition with over two thousand signatures was delivered to Parliament seeking to put a stop to the project “until misgivings and shortcomings on the project can be identified and investigated and other options explored,” said James Thomson, spokesman for the Te Mato Vai Petition Committee (CIN, 5 April 2014). It was agreed that a Parliamentary Select Committee would be established; however, the project still proceeded.

Since the 2011 establishment of the Climate Change Division in the Office of the Prime Minister, a number of initiatives have commenced. A US$5 million Adaptation Fund project facilitated the development of a national climate-change policy. In November 2013, the Kaveinga Tapapa: Climate and Disaster Compatible Development Policy 2013–2016 was launched. In taking an integrated approach, the policy is focused on low-carbon, climate-change–and disaster-resilient development. Prime Minister Henry Puna’s introductory statement notes that the policy, by integrating with existing policy instruments and planning tools, “builds on our existing structures and draws on our capability to lift our game” and its “fundamental message is to prepare today for tomorrow” (Cook Islands Government 2013, 2).

With a reputation for punching above its weight, a potential game lifter for the Cook Islands lies in its ability to deliver on the government’s optimistic energy security goals. Targets of 50 percent of electricity to be supplied from renewable energy sources by 2015 and 100 percent by 2020 are looking attainable with the help of old and new development friends. Support from a range of donors has been negotiated. This includes a NZ$20.5 million project to design and construct solar-powered hybrid energy systems on Manihiki, Rakahanga, Penrhyn, Pukapuka, Nassau, and Palmerston to enable these communities to move toward 95 percent reliance on solar power. New Zealand company Power Smart has been contracted and is expected to start in August 2014 (CIN, 12 June 2014). In addition, another New Zealand company, Infratec Renewables (NETcon International) was awarded a NZ$3.3 million contract funded by New Zealand and the European Union to install a 960-kilowatt solar fan at the Rarotonga Airport. Construction on that project commenced in April 2014 (CIN, 29 April 2014). However, it was not all plain sailing, with local businessman and Chamber of Commerce President Steve Anderson questioning decisions to send hazardous lead-acid batteries rather than lithium-ion batteries to a number of low-lying atolls as part of the renewable energy plans.

Given the potential of aid being tied to a donor country’s foreign and trade policies, and noting the nature of the relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, such decisions are perceived as the Cook Islands government’s not wanting “to rock the boat
too much with New Zealand and Australia and China and Japan who are the donors, so . . . they’re being guided by the donors who basically lay down the criteria of what’s going to be given,” said Anderson in an interview on Radio Australia (Fayle 2014).

Cook Islands efforts at the international level took forward three policy priorities of loss and damage, climate-change adaptation, and climate-change financing to the 19th meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties in Warsaw, Poland, in November 2013. The delegation leader (and one of seven women on the eight-member team), Ana Tira’a’a, in commenting on the importance of attending such meetings and seeking global agreement to address climate-change impacts, said, “In our northern atolls there are some areas that are less than 300 metres wide—ocean on one side, lagoon on the other. Losing a little bit of land has a big impact on low lying communities with limited land area. Loss of land is not easily replaced” (CIN, 18 Nov 2013).

During the period under review, the Cook Islands gave support to regional climate-change efforts. Prime Minister Puna, as the outgoing Pacific Islands Forum chair, attended the 44th Forum in the Marshall Islands in September 2013, adding his signature to the Majuro Declaration, but not before calling on the leaders to support the Nansen Initiative on climate-change—and disaster-induced displacement and the Oceans 21 initiative for the sustainable development of the Pacific oceanscape (PIFS 2013).

Marine resource policy issues also featured during this review year. With an exclusive economic zone of over 200 million square kilometers of ocean, the Cook Islands establishment of a marine protected area continues moving toward being “legally designated and zoned by the end of 2015” (CIN, 22 Feb 2014). Situated in the southern region, the marine park will cover an area of approximately 1.1 million square kilometers. Following extensive consultations across the pa enua (islands), Marae Moana Marine Park Project Manager Jacqui Evans stated that “we don’t want to prevent opportunities for the country to use its marine resources but we want to see our ecosystems being sustained because they provide so much for us in terms of food, shelter, recreation, medicine, income through tourism and basic ecosystem services such as water treatment and coastal protection” (CIN, 14 May 2014). Meanwhile, with zoning providing varied protections within the Marae Moana area, the government continues in developing the institutional and regulatory framework to enable the mining of mineral deposits from the seabed. Located predominately through the central and northern parts of Cook Islands waters, at depths of up to 6,000 meters, manganese nodules rich in cobalt, nickel, and copper are said to offer 10 billion tonnes of mineable resources (Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority 2014). With the government’s eye on the potential economic benefits as an opportunity to diversify the country’s narrow economic base, the environmental and social implications continue to be raised as prominent concerns by cultural and environmental watchdog groups. After a public
session of a Seabed Minerals regional workshop focused on financial aspects of deep-sea minerals and attended by a range of international representatives, Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Commissioner Paul Lynch said the meeting “was hijacked by people who didn’t want to listen or ask questions of our panel” (CIN, 19 May 2014). Attendees included members of the national environment organization, Te Ipu-karea Society, which took the opportunity to raise questions about cultural, legal, and environmental issues. While frustration and discomfort levels rose during the meeting, the incident highlighted that this is an area of economic development that will draw locals out of their shells.

This year under review saw a number of tax reforms rolled out. Tax rate thresholds were amended and welfare payments were increased, making more money available for low-income earners. While many of these measures were seen as favorable, the increase in Value Added Tax to 15 percent was less popular, with price increases expected to be passed on to consumers (CIN, 3 Jan 2014).

The instigation of back taxing pensioners who collect New Zealand superannuation was also unpopular. The reform saw the Revenue Management Division of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management take money directly out of pensioners’ bank accounts. Such was the outcry that a pensioners lobby group was formed. Known as Grey Power, they campaigned against the taxing of pensions, with a march on Parliament in December 2013. Opposition leader and Member of Parliament Wilkie Rasmussen found favor with protesters when he announced that the Democratic Party would abolish the back tax (CIN, 27 Feb 2014). However, the government showed its ability to take heed of its constituents’ voices and undertook to amend the legislation and refund pensioner back taxes (CIN, 19 April 2014).

On the islands of Rarotonga, the Murienua district by-election was announced for 19 September. This followed the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister Tom Masters and his inauguration on 9 August as the new queen’s representative.

The Cook Islands Party candidate Kaota TuariKI won the seat, beating Democratic Party candidate James Beer. However, alleged bribery and treating claims saw TuariKI resign before the petition went to court (CIN, 14 Jan 2014). A rerun of the by-election was set for February. This time James Beer was successful over the Cook Islands Party’s Tare Mareiti, leaving the Cook Islands Party with 13 seats, the Democratic Party 10 seats, and Norman George holding one seat as an independent.

Since her appointment in 2012 as the non-elected Speaker of the House, well-regarded former Secretary-General of the Cook Islands Red Cross Niki Rattle has been kept busy inside and outside of parliamentary sittings. The termination of the Clerk of Parliament Tupuna Rakanui, a long-serving member of staff, featured in 2013. Rakanui, who was appointed in January 2013 following the retirement of Nga Valoa, was discharged of his duties in August after a review of his performance.

In reaction to the termination, Democratic Party Member of Parlia-
ment for Titikaveka Selena Napa and stalwart Atiu Member of Parliament for Teenui-Mapumai Norman George waded in to publically question the termination. Prime Minister Puna would not be drawn into commenting out of respect for “the authority of the Speaker in maintaining responsibility over any employment issues” (CIN, 20 Aug 2013).

In consolation for his termination, Rakanui was appointed back into parliamentary services in the role of clerk to the Are Ariki (House of Paramount Chiefs), an appointment advocated for by the head of the Are Ariki, Tou Ariki (CIN, 12 Sept 2013).

The subsequent appointment of Pastor John Tangi as clerk of Parliament drew a reaction from the opposition party leader Wilkie Rasmussen (CIN, 19 Sept 2013). Despite Tangi’s suitability based on his previous experience as Speaker of the House and a Democratic Party member of Parliament for Tupapa, Rasmussen alleged interference by the prime minister and the Speaker in the appointment (CIN, 14 Sept 2013).

The period of review was also marked by the passing of two prominent figures. The paramount chief of the Puaikura district on Rarotonga, Tinomana Ruta Tuoro Ariki, passed away on 27 June 2013. She held the title for over twenty years after her investiture in 1991. Affectionately known as “Mama Bear,” her services extended beyond her tribal boundaries to a number of nongovernmental organizations and groups. Of note, in 1984 she was a founding member of the Cook Islands National Council of Women, and in 1988 she became the first woman deacon on Rarotonga for the Nikao Cook Islands Christian Church (CIN, 2 July 2013).

On 24 August Samoan resident Tamanavao Navy Epati passed away suddenly after suffering a heart attack at the Rarotonga Golf Course at age 49. Well known in Sāmoa and the Cook Islands, he was a representative athlete and national sports administrator for rugby, rugby league, and boxing. Epati was the head of the Ministry of Marine Resources and held the post of public service commissioner for five years until September 2011 (CIN, 26 Aug 2013). During that time he led public service reforms, which included the passing of the much-needed Public Service Act in 2009.

Another passing of sorts also eventuated during the year of review. Investigations by authorities of Cabinet Minister Teina Bishop’s business dealings remain unresolved, with no decision despite assistance from New Zealand’s Serious Fraud Office (CIN, 14 June 2014). The investigation surrounded the 2012 purchase, sale, and trading of two fishing boats, the Orongo and the Bounty, to Huanan Fishery (Cook Islands) Limited, a subsidiary of Luen Thai Fishing Venture, without the Business Trade Investment Board’s approval to sell to an offshore buyer, and the granting of a fishing license to the company approved by Bishop as minister of marine resources (CIN, 1 Aug 2013; CH, 10 July 2013). With the allegations potentially posing a threat to the credibility and survival of the Cook Islands Party-lead government, Puna accepted Bishop’s decision to hand in the marine resources and pearl authority portfolios while investigations took place. Initially this led Bishop to relinquish his marine
resources and tourism portfolios in early August, but Bishop remained a cabinet minister, retaining the education portfolio. There was speculation that the investigation of Bishop as a long-serving cabinet member might have had some bearing on his consideration for the deputy prime minister position, which had also been vacated in August. Four months later, in December, Teariki Heather was named deputy prime minister, with Bishop himself believing that the investigation was the reason he was not appointed to the role (CIN, 18 Dec 2013).

By April, discord within the cabinet had taken hold, resulting in Bishop’s resignation from the party. In the midst of a Parliament sitting and with the supplementary budget to be presented on 15 April, the no-show by Bishop and Tupapa Member of Parliament George Maggie reduced the Cook Islands Party one-seat majority of 13 to 11 (CIN, 17 April 2014). On 17 April, Queen’s Representative Tom Marsters was advised to dissolve Parliament. Initially he said that “it is necessary to have early elections because of the need to have the incoming government in place well in advance of the 50th anniversary of self-government in 2015” (CIN, 17 April 2014).

With the general election set for 9 July 2014, the prime minister also had a “conflict of interest” allegation to deal with. This related to his pearl farm in Manihiki, which was allegedly set to gain over NZ$100,000 in assistance as part of a NZ$3 million aid funding from New Zealand to revitalize the pearl industry in the Cook Islands (CIN, 20 May 2014).

The current government assumed a caretaker role in order to manage the country’s affairs in the run-up to the snap election. Legislative matters due to be tabled in the April sitting of Parliament have now been benched until after the election. These matters included the 2013–14 supplementary budget, which is intended to rectify the unpopular taxing of pensions and to fund the rebuilding of two schools that were damaged by arson attacks in 2013 (CIN, 14 April 2014).

Finance Minister Mark Brown expected to keep rolling out existing commitments, while provisions within the constitution allow for a 1.5 percent expenditure of the 2013–14 NZ$200 million annual budget as an administrative measure to address funding gaps created by the policy changes. No new initiatives will be addressed until after the election (CIN, 14 April 2014). Parliamentary select committees were also dissolved until after the election. This includes the committee convened to review the Te Mato Vai major infrastructure water project in response to the public petition (CIN, 14 April 2014).

Political campaigning for the early July general election dominated the final quarter of this year of review and culminated in preliminary results showing no clear majority winner. Of the 24 parliamentary seats, election night results had the Democratic Party ahead with 11 seats, followed by the Cook Islands Party with 10 seats. The newly formed Cook Islands One had 2 seats and the Mangaia seat of Tamarua tied. Following the recount and additional special and postal votes, the results swung to give the Cook Islands Party a 13-seat majority to lead the country. Despite the
Cook Islands Party being out-pollled by the Democratic Party, the result highlights “the disparity in the value of a vote across the Cook Islands” (CIN, 23 July 2014), with the balance of power sitting with smaller voter constituencies.

The Democratic Party, now with eight seats, saw their leader Wilkie Rasmussen lose his seat by 10 votes. The Mitiaro seat they won on election night came back tied after the recount, with both candidates garnering 50 votes each (CIN, 18 Jul 2014). A by-election will be needed to sort out the deadlock unless a petition to the court proves successful for either party. On that note, by the 25 July deadline, nine electoral petitions had been lodged with the Cook Islands High Court. As the post-election caretaker government, the Cook Islands Party will now have to wait for the outcome of the court actions. With the constitutional provisions to enable the caretaker government to operate with one quarter of the 2013–14 government appropriations until the end of September, the pressure is now on the judiciary and Chief Justice Thomas Weston, rather than the voting public, to determine the country’s government for the next four years. While the year has featured a full range of political challenges and government-led reforms that have been contested and debated by the public, it is likely that the upcoming celebrations of fifty years of Cook Islands sovereignty will provide a positive focus for 2014–15.

CHRISTINA NEWPORT

References


French Polynesia

The political situation of French Polynesia during the period under review was in two ways fundamentally different from previous periods. First, as a result of May 2013 elections, there is a two-thirds majority for Gaston Flosse’s anti-independence