Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2014
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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 byelection 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
Tahoeraa Huiraatira Party in the legislative assembly that is most likely to remain for the full term, setting the present situation apart from the preceding decade-long instability caused by constantly changing political majorities. Yet the pending retrials of President Flosse (who was earlier sentenced to jail terms for corruption, which he had appealed) as well as his advancing age (he turned eighty-three in June 2013) make it doubtful that he will retain the presidency for the entire five-year term.

Second, due to the tireless efforts of Flosse’s pro-independence predecessor Oscar Temaru and his administration to reinscribe the country on the United Nations list of Non-Self-Governing Territories (nsgts), which succeeded literally on Temaru’s last day in Office in May 2013, French Polynesia is now regarded by the international community as a territory to be decolonized, although France keeps resisting what it regards as UN interference in its domestic policies. The new international status of the country gives the pro-independence opposition unprecedented possibilities to expose the country’s problems before international audiences and to promote their long-term goals of building a sovereign state.

Temaru and his confidant, Senator Richard Ariihau Tuheiava (one of the country’s two representatives in the French Senate), thus continued their lobbying at UN institutions, where they are now able to be admitted as official representatives of an nsgt and no longer need to find a friendly country to include them in its national delegation. On 8 October 2013, the two testified before the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly, which is charged with decolonization issues. On 14 October, the committee adopted a draft resolution to be introduced to the floor of the 68th UN General Assembly as a follow-up to the reinscription resolution of the previous session in May. The draft followed Temaru’s and Tuheiava’s advice in recommending a long period of political education in order to overcome decades of French indoctrination and propaganda before a meaningful referendum of self-determination could be conducted in the country (United Nations Web TV 2013; TI, 9 Oct, 21 Oct 2013).

While the resolution was tabled to be voted on by the General Assembly floor, attempts by President Flosse and his government to undo, block, or stall the UN decolonization process were not successful. Despite yet another resolution passed by Flosse’s two-thirds majority in the French Polynesia Assembly on 28 August denouncing the UN activities as “interference in the bilateral issues between France and French Polynesia” and lobbying efforts by Flosse to influence Pacific Island leaders during the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in September in Majuro to support this position (TI, 28 Aug 2013), the leaders preferred to be silent on the issue, and the final communiqué of the Forum did not contain any mention of French Polynesia (PIFS 2013). Previously, at the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG) meeting in Auckland on 30 August, Flosse, who became president of the organization for a year on a principle of alphabetical rotation, had convinced the other leaders of the Polynesian countries to include in their communi-
qué a note acknowledging “the resolution adopted by the French Polynesia Assembly reaffirming the democratic choice of its population to remain the strongly autonomous overseas country that it is” (PLG 2013), although the PLG declined to make any concrete commitments in support of Flosse’s position in the international arena.

The French government, on the other hand, also frustrated Flosse, since his demand for an immediate referendum on independence that would not restrict the electorate to long-term residents—which most likely would turn out a majority against independence—fell on deaf ears. When Minister of Overseas Territories Victorin Lurel visited Tahiti in late November and gave a program speech before the French Polynesia Assembly, he declared that there was no reason for any independence referendum, neither according to UN standards on decolonization nor under current French electoral law. Instead, Lurel asked all local political forces to collaborate with the French government in developing the country (TI, 30 Nov 2013).

Temaru and his coalition of opposition parties, Union Pour La Démocratie (UPLD), boycotted and protested Lurel’s visit, insisting that the Flosse government was illegitimate since it was run by the “mafia” (referring to the multiple criminal convictions of Flosse for corruption, all of which were undergoing appeals at the time). Some protestors went as far as depicting Lurel, a Socialist politician from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, as a “house negro”—in order to portray him as a sellout/colonial collaborator and simultaneously insult him personally by alluding to his black Caribbean (= slave descendant) heritage. Lurel was infuriated and accused Temaru’s Tavini Huiraatira, the largest constituent party within UPLD and official local ally of the ruling French Socialist Party, of disloyalty (TPM, Dec 2013). The minister seemed to forget, however, that it was the Socialist Party that broke the partnership agreement in the first place by opposing UN reinscription, which the two parties had agreed to in 2004 and 2011. Temaru’s party had hitherto dutifully fulfilled its part of the agreements by constantly lending local support to Socialist politicians on the French national level.

A year earlier, in a similar speech before the Congress of New Caledonia in Nouméa, Lurel had admitted that France “never knew how to decolonize” but added that “here [in New Caledonia] we are inventing a new formula” (TI, 24 Nov 2012). Given the attitude of his government toward French Polynesia throughout the year, as well as other recent colonial policies such as the départementalisation (ie, annexation as a supposed part of metropolitan France) of the Comorian island of Mayotte in 2011 despite its contested international legal status, one could conclude that France is creating a “new formula” only for New Caledonia but remains clueless on how to decolonize the rest of its crypto-colonial “overseas” empire.

In the old colonial fashion of his right-wing predecessors, Lurel accepted and replicated Flosse’s discourse by claiming that the 2013 election results should be seen as a plebiscite against reinscription. This line of argument has frequently been used by French governments whenever
pro-French parties held the majority of seats in the local assembly and reflects an unfortunate tradition in French political culture of misinterpreting elections of candidates to office as plebiscites on issues, and vice versa.

However, in a legal analysis written a few days after the UN reinscription vote, University of New Caledonia Law Professor Mathias Chauchat argued that a local election and a referendum of self-determination should not be confused. Furthermore, even the rejection of a particular self-governing status in a plebiscite should not be equated with a vote in favor of integration and therefore precipitate a removal from the NSGT list, as, for example, Tokelau was not removed from the list when its voters did not consent in sufficient numbers to a status of free association with New Zealand in 2007. Echoing Lurel’s Nouméa statement, but without the hypocrisy of the latter, Chauchat argued that “in New Caledonia the [French] Republic commits itself to a progressive, peaceful and irreversible process of decolonization, which has not turned against her. Her policy would become incomprehensible, and quickly counter-productive, if she would not be able to see the Pacific as it is today, as the Anglo-Saxons have been able to, and would offer no future perspective for French Polynesia” (Chauchat 2013).

Besides these fundamental legal arguments, it is also worth noting that neither Tahoeraa nor the pro-French opposition group A Tia Porinetia (ATP) mentioned opposition to reinscription in their campaign manifestos. While it is true that leading candidates of both parties agitated against reinscription during the campaign, the absence of the topic in the manifestos makes it even more of a stretch to construe votes for the two parties as votes against UN reinscription.

At the same time, however, Tahiti-based French historian Jean-Marc Regnault considers the French Polynesia Assembly resolution of August 2011 (in which the then UPLD majority expressed itself in favor of reinscription) a tactical mistake. According to Regnault’s analysis, this resolution tied the issue down to one of majority support, which would eventually backfire on UPLD, as it no longer represents the majority since the 2013 elections. In contrast, the Kanak pro-independence umbrella group FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste) achieved New Caledonia’s reinscription in 1986 without ever attempting to get a majority vote of the territorial institutions of New Caledonia and instead relied on international legal principles that protect minorities, especially indigenous minorities (Regnault 2013, 197, 223 n423).

Unimpressed by the French and French Polynesia governments’ opposition, the UN General Assembly on 11 December unanimously passed the draft as resolution 68/93. The resolution once more affirms French Polynesia’s inalienable right to self-determination and calls on France and the local government to cooperate with UN agencies in order to implement this right and, specifically, “to develop political education programmes for the Territory in order to foster an awareness among the people of French Polynesia of their right to self-determination in conformity with the legitimate
political status options.” Furthermore, the resolution “requests the Secretary-General, in cooperation with relevant specialized agencies of the United Nations, to compile a report on the environmental, ecological, health and other impacts as a consequence of the 30-year period of nuclear testing in the Territory” (UN 2013c).

Whereas the first sections of the resolution have merely symbolic value as long as both Paris and the country government continue refusing any cooperation with the United Nations on the matter—Flosse once more denounced the resolution as an “unacceptable interference” (pi, 13 Dec 2013)—the section on nuclear testing is of great significance. Up until now, the debate on the effects of French nuclear testing (1966 to 1996) was held within the constraints of French domestic institutions; the resolution officially declares the consequences of French nuclear testing an international matter that must be addressed at the UN level. Since French Polynesia, unlike some totalitarian regimes, is not cut off from the outside world, France will hardly be able to prevent the compilation of the UN report on nuclear testing effects, even if Paris refuses direct cooperation with UN agencies in the matter.

In the annual UN General Assembly report on the NSGTs, released on 17 March 2014, one could see that of all seventeen NSGTs on the list, the only one for which the administering power had not transmitted information as required under article 73e of the UN Charter was French Polynesia (UN 2014b). France was thus openly defying principles of international law, but this would not discourage UN agencies from accelerating their engagement with the territory.

On 26 March, the UN Decolonization Committee released its first working paper on the country, giving an overview of its political, economic, and social situation; listing the resolutions and documents issued hitherto by the United Nations in its regard; and providing summaries of the testimony given by Temaru and Tuheiava before various UN bodies (UN 2014a). The document was released in preparation for the annual regional seminar of the Decolonization Committee, which took place 21–23 May in Nadi, Fiji. While France participated, its submission referred only to New Caledonia and mentioned not a word about French Polynesia (Government of France 2014). Senator Tuheiava, in his submission as an expert from an NSGT, denounced the hypocrisy of the French government in adhering to UN principles only when it fits its interests, and he called on the Special Committee to include a passage to that effect in a draft resolution for the upcoming sixty-ninth General Assembly session. The senator furthermore mentioned the control of France over the resources in the territory’s Exclusive Economic Zone as well as over its airspace as exemplary evidence for the lack of true self-government (Tuheiava 2014).

At the meeting of the Decolonization Committee at the UN headquarters in New York, 30 June–1 July, the scene from Fiji was repeated. After the section on New Caledonia, in which French government representatives participated, the latter rushed out of the chambers when the issue of French Polynesia came up for discussion.
If one analyzes the history of French decolonization during the past decades, Paris’s arrogant attitude as displayed in the UN meetings is not very surprising. In his recent book on France’s “belated decolonizations” in the Pacific, Regnault described how it took France decades to accept New Caledonia’s 1986 reinscription as an nsgt. UN officials were not invited to visit New Caledonia until 1999, and the annual transmitting of information under article 73e was only begun in 2004 (Regnault 2013, 74–76). In that sense, the pattern of France’s attitude toward New Caledonia seems to be recurring now for French Polynesia, almost down to exact details. For instance, the line of argument by the Françoise Hollande administration against French Polynesia’s reinscription as being allegedly contrary to public majority opinion is virtually identical to the discourse of the cohabitation governments of Mitterrand and Chirac in the mid-1980s in reference to New Caledonia (Regnault 2013, 225). While after decades of denial of colonialism some progress is being made in New Caledonia, decolonization of French Polynesia “still has a long history ahead” (Regnault 2013, 215).

Besides its visible effects on the political dynamics of French Polynesia and on the problem of belated French decolonization in general, the reinscription of the country as an nsgt also has ramifications for other issues of decolonization and related international legal issues throughout the Pacific region. It is interesting to note that during the debate on the reinscription resolution in the UN General Assembly on 17 May 2013, the representative of Indonesia, while endorsing the resolution, cautioned against using it as a precedent to “dismember or impair totally or in part the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign or independent States”—referring most likely to the disputed status of West Papua (UN 2013a). While the latter is a more complex legal issue (involving a sovereignty dispute and the denial of self-determination in its resolution rather than a classic case of denial of decolonization by an administrative power), Indonesia’s concerns over the reinscription resolution show its potential for unforeseen far-reaching consequences.

Ni-Vanuatu Prime Minister Moana Carcasses Kalosil, Tahitian by birth and leading the one country that has consistently supported West Papuan self-determination, certainly interpreted the resolution in this way in his speech before the plenary session of the UN General Assembly on 28 September. He commended the reinscription of French Polynesia as a recent effort to bring decolonization efforts back to life at the United Nations, reminding the international community of other decolonization-related issues waiting to be resolved, such as West Papua, as well as the continuing French claim over Vanuatu’s two southernmost islands (Carcasses 2013).

Geographically closer to French Polynesia, Rapa Nui also saw its struggle for decolonization from Chile significantly affected by the resolution. Earlier in 2013, the pro-independence umbrella group “Rapa Nui Parliament” had gained significant inter-
national momentum by being invited by the Temaru government to be a founding member of the Polynesian Parliamentary Group at its inaugural meeting in Papeete (11, 4 March 2013). During a session of the UN Decolonization Committee on 21 June 2013, the representative of Chile first expressed his annoyance that a paper on Pacific decolonization created in the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that referred to both French Polynesia and Rapa Nui was supposedly inaccurate, and then he mentioned, truly inaccurately, that the country government of French Polynesia had less autonomy than a municipality in Chile—thereby implicitly arguing that French Polynesia could not serve as a precedent for Rapa Nui, which currently is administered as a municipality within Chile (UN 2013b). The statement was an attempt to curry favor with supporters of French Polynesian independence and thereby distract from Chile’s own atrocious colonial record in relation to Rapa Nui.

Even at the PLG meeting in Auckland in August 2013, which Flosse used as a platform for his propaganda as mentioned above, the atmosphere of awakening in Pacific decolonization and related issues apparently took some hold. Kamana’opono Crabbe, the chief executive officer of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, attended the meeting as an observer representing Hawai’i, which was duly mentioned in the communiqué (PLG 2013). It might not be a coincidence that it was Crabbe who in May 2014 would create a stir in Hawaiian politics when he sent an open letter to US Secretary of State John Kerry about the Hawaiian Kingdom’s continued sovereignty under international law (Hawaiian Government blog 2014).

As far as domestic developments are concerned, the review period saw two attempts to introduce new currency to the country, one successful and regular in circumstances and the other unsuccessful and rather bizarre. Both, however, provide evidence of ongoing French colonialism. At the beginning of the year, the Institut d’Émission d’Outre-Mer (IEOM, the French central bank for overseas territories) issued a new series of CFP franc banknotes, which were put into circulation during the following months, with the old notes gradually phased out by September 2014. The change in banknote design was intended to pay lip service to the 1998 Nouméa Accord on New Caledonia, which stipulated that the future banknotes of New Caledonia shall show “Kanak cultural symbols” instead of the French colonial officials and nondescript “island paradise” scenes depicted on the previous series (which is issued for all three French Pacific territories). While the logical step would have been to create a separate series for New Caledonia satisfying the passage in the accord, which was originally planned and the designs released on a numismatic website (Banknote News 2012), the IEOM eventually decided to simply create a new series for all three Pacific territories, and only one out of the four new notes (the 10,000 francs note) actually displays Kanak cultural symbols, while the other denominations depict generic tropical flora and fauna.

While the IEOM was making those decisions behind closed doors, the
so-called Republic of Pakumotu (a self-proclaimed entity with about a hundred supporters and its headquarters in Outumaoro, within the municipality of Punauia near its boundary with Faaa) announced the issuing of its own national currency, called the “patu.” In mid-October, Athanase Teiri, the leader of the “republic” (who, strangely enough, does not style himself as president but as “King Taginui I”), announced that his “government” had issued one billion patu, which would be put in circulation at the exchange rate of 145 CFP francs for one patu and would be the only legal tender starting in January 2014 (TI, 17 Oct 2013).

Even though most observers looked on the actions of the group with mild amusement, French prosecutor José Thorel announced he would prosecute the group for “issuing fake money” and would confiscate their patu notes, even though they resemble neither the old nor the new IEOM notes, nor do they bear any inscription saying they have any value in CFP francs. After a Pakumotu supporter tried to pay for her gasoline with a patu note, the police not only arrested her but a few days later also stormed into the group’s headquarters, seized all the patu notes, and arrested Teiri for “counterfeiting” money (TI, 11 Dec 2013). Eventually, however, the court did not follow the prosecutor’s excessive actions, and when Teiri was sentenced to six months imprisonment on Jan 21, it was not for issuing “patu” but for intimidation, since he had authored letters threatening IEOM and the territorial government for not complying with his “currency-issuing” scheme (TI, 21 Jan 2014).

Things turned ugly, however, when police arrived at Teiri’s house on 29 January in order to carry out the sentence and take him to jail, since he had not shown up to the court appointment. The armed bodyguards of the “king” opened fire at the approaching police cars and a gunfight ensued. Luckily no one was injured, and Teiri and his bodyguards were arrested on charges of attempted murder and illegal possession of firearms (TPM, Feb 2014).

The “Pakumotu” affair raises some important questions. It must be asked why people get arrested and charged within days for trivial affairs like attempting to defraud a business of a small amount of money in the case of the lady at the gas station, or merely for the act of producing tons of valueless fantasy money in the name of a fantasy state in the case of Teiri, whereas for various politicians, such as President Flosse, who have defrauded the public of the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of US dollars through embezzlement, the justice system takes years to prosecute them.

Second, the phenomenon of self-proclaimed governments—of which there are several others in French Polynesia, including two more emerging during the time under review (TI, 23 Oct 2013; TI, 26 April, 27 May 2014)—must be seen in a social context. The relative success of these eccentric groups is best explained as offering a utopian alternative to the increasingly desperate situation many poor and unemployed Tahitians find themselves in. This is even more the case as many of the latter become progressively disillusioned with tradi-
tional political parties, none of which have offered much to remedy the ever-aggravating social ills.

While Flosse and other pro-French politicians had constantly denounced the Temaru government for its perceived incompetence in dealing with such issues and, instead, for its “obsession” with decolonization, the new all-powerful Flosse government has not done much in its first year in office to alleviate the situation either. At the beginning, the new government undertook a few good concrete steps such as opening the country’s first shelter for homeless people in Tipaerui valley (TI, 4 June 2013) and announcing reform measures, such as the cutting of one thousand administrative positions (TI, 3 July 2013). However, it soon became obvious that Flosse’s government was not interested in real structural reforms but rather in continuing “business as usual,” that is, a policy of patronage and clientelism. Following this pattern, the new Flosse government created new posts with questionable purpose, for instance, reinstalling the so-called High Council of French Polynesia (an institution supposedly providing legal advice to the country government that had previously been abolished without any visible negative consequences) and nominating new members thereof (TI, 11 July, 29 Aug 2013), before the controversial institution ended up being declared illegal by the French Council of State (highest administrative court) (TPM, March 2014). Controversies also continued over the appointment of former French Minister for Overseas Territories Brigitte Girardin as the country’s “special representative in Paris” (TPM, Aug 2013), a quite vaguely defined job that appears especially superfluous since there already is a well-staffed office representing the territory in Paris. In the same context of purely patronage politics should be seen the appointment of Teiva Manutahi, leader of a small political party that had joined Tahoeraa for the second round of the 2013 elections, to the similarly vague position of “mediator of French Polynesia” (TI, 5 July 2013).

In November 2013, the Flosse government went through its first major crisis when Bruno Marty, the minister for transport infrastructure, resigned after crashing his car while driving drunk. The irony of the situation was not lost on the opposition and the media, but, instead of punishing Marty’s scandalous behavior by severing all ties with him, Flosse announced he would appoint him director of a semi-public company (PIR, 18 Nov 2013; TPM, Dec 2013).

Marty’s resignation triggered a reshuffling of Flosse’s cabinet. Not only was his secretary, Albert Solia, appointed to succeed him, but Flosse also created a ninth cabinet portfolio for Manolita Ly, who became minister for labor, social, and family issues, while the other portfolios were redistributed among the remaining seven ministers (TI, 17 Nov 2013).

During the final months of 2013 another controversy struck Tahitian society, namely, the attempt by Hishan El-Barkani, an ethnic Arab Islamic cleric from France, to establish a mosque in downtown Papeete. Other than a few ethnic Arab French settlers, there are virtually no Muslims in Tahiti. Al-Barkani, however, started a campaign to convert Tahitians to Islam, and indeed a few local individu-
als joined his congregation (NT, 15 Oct 2013). Many local inhabitants were outraged by this, and the specter of Islamic fundamentalism was raised. On 9 November, about four hundred people marched through Papeete, demanding the closure of the Islamic community center El-Barkani had created in a Papeete office building and supporting a liberal and secular society (TI, 9 Nov 2003). While such concerns seem understandable, it should also be recalled that Tahiti has for decades hosted a synagogue, a Chinese Taoist temple, a few revived temples of traditional Polynesian religion, as well as churches of various Christian denominations (including some that are fundamentalist)—all without precipitating comparable reactions.

Party politics hit the headlines again when the municipal elections, held on 23 and 30 March 2014 in a complex two-round system, were approaching. The results mainly confirmed the existing political landscape, but the “orange wave” of 2012 and 2013, referring to the Tahoeraa Party colors, did not continue. Most of the mayors affiliated with Tahoeraa kept their offices, and Tahoeraa actually gained two more municipalities, but at the price of losing two others. Papeete Mayor Michel Buillard (Tahoeraa) was reelected, and in Pirae, Flosse’s son-in-law and French National Assembly member Edouard Fritch, who had already been mayor from 2000 to 2008, won an overall majority against ATP-affiliated incumbent Béatrice Vernaudon. In Mataiea, UPLD incumbent Tina Cross was defeated by Tahoeraa candidate Tearii Alpha in the first round, but in the neighboring municipal district of Papeari, Tahoeraa incumbent and French National Assembly member Jonas Tahuaitu surprisingly lost the mayoralty. Tahoeraa also lost the mayoralty of President Flosse’s home island of Mangareva when the incumbent mayor was not reelected.

Despite all predictions by pro-French leaders, UPLD was able to hold on to its stronghold of Faaa, where the list of ex-president Oscar Temaru (mayor of Faaa since 1983) won a two-thirds majority in the first round. Temaru’s lieutenant and former Assembly Speaker Jacqui Drollet also won reelection as deputy mayor of his home district of Hitiaa on Tahiti’s east coast. The anticipated victory of UPLD in the entire East Coast municipality, of which Hitiaa is a constituent district, was prevented by the resignation of several Tahoeraa municipal councilors, which precipitated fresh by-elections. A similar tactic was used in the Western Taiarapu municipality. These cases aside, UPLD was not able to further extend its municipal power base, since it lost the Moorea island municipality when its UPLD incumbent mayor, Raymond Van Bastolaer, missed reelection.

ATP, the third political force, held on to its strongholds. Incumbent ATP mayors Ronald Tumahai of Punaauia and Philip Schyle of Arue were confirmed in office, as well as former President Gaston Tong Sang, who retained the mayoralty of Bora Bora. The city of Uturoa on Raiatea, as well as Ua Pou island in the Marquesas, remained in the hands of ATP, and Mangareva’s new mayor is an ATP affiliate as well (TI, 26 March, 1 April 2014; TPM, April 2014).
The elections were overshadowed by multiple strikes of municipal employees throughout the country. According to Tahiti-Pacifique Magazine editor Alex du Prel, the strikes gave evidence, first, of the corruption of trade union leaders who have regularly been using strikes as a sort of protection racket to get concessions from politicians, and, second, of the impracticality of new municipal service standards that have been imposed by France as binding by the beginning of 2014 but that are beyond the capacities of most municipalities (TPM, April 2014; PIR, 26 March 2014).

The municipal by-elections in the Tahiti East Coast municipality on 15 and 28 June brought no change, as UPLD-affiliated Dauphin Domingo won the mayoralty, rendering the Tahoeraa challenge to the original results a waste of taxpayer money. Since French law no longer allows for the concurrent holding of national assembly membership and local political office, Edouard Fritch had to resign from his national assembly seat on his inauguration as mayor of Pirae, which necessitated a by-election for the first constituency (including the municipalities of Papeete, Pirae, and Arue on Tahiti as well as the Tuamotu and Marquesas Islands), also held on 15 and 28 June. Unsurprisingly, Tahoeraa candidate Maina Sage won in the second round, but the score of opposing UPLD candidate Tauhiti Nena (41.98%) was significantly higher than that of Fritch’s 2012 UPLD opponent Pierre Frébault (36.78%) (TI, 30 June 2014; TPM, Aug 2014).

Overall it became clear that despite doomsday scenarios predicted after the election loss in May 2013, UPLD was still a force to be reckoned with. On the first anniversary of the country’s UN reinscription, a monument was unveiled in Faaa at the end of a commemoration march that was attended by about four thousand supporters and sympathizers (TPM, June–July 2014).

Support for UPLD was also shown during the European Parliament elections on 25 May, when the majority of votes cast in the country were won by the Tavini-supported Socialist list. However, participation was extremely low, with only 14.97 percent voting in an election that most people see as irrelevant for the territory. Tahoeraa had decided to boycott the vote, mainly as a strategy to then proclaim the overwhelming number of abstentions as actual votes in favor of Tahoeraa—a contentious logic furnishing a fit occasion for UPLD to denounce Flosse as a hypocrite and question his self-proclaimed loyalty to the institutions of the French Republic. In any case, besides the hot air thus created, the election proved not practically relevant for the country, since the three seats assigned to French overseas territories in the EU parliament were won by candidates from other overseas possessions (TI, 25 May, 26 May 2014).

In terms of economic development, the Flosse government did take a few promising steps to encourage foreign investment in the country. In December, Flosse visited China to initiate the negotiation of business deals with various Chinese companies (TPM, Jan 2014). One of those projects, which has been in the making for several years, is the creation of a tuna farm in
the lagoon of one of the atolls of the Tuamotu Archipelago. On 25 February, the country government signed a contract with the Chinese company Tian Rui International Investment, which promised to invest 150 billion CFP francs (approximately US$1.66 billion) over fifteen years in order to create the fish farm. The lagoon of Makemo atoll was chosen as the site of the aquaculture project (TPM, March 2014). It is interesting to note that the negotiations for the project had started under the Temaru government and that as long as Flosse was in the opposition, he had denounced this and other Chinese investment projects as evidence that Temaru was “selling out our country to the Chinese.”

Whether the project will ever be realized or, like so many before, will remain an empty promise doomed to economic failure is still unclear. Only a few months after the contract was signed, the project was once more revised, with the location moved to Hao atoll instead of Makemo. As the site of a former French naval and air force base that supported nuclear testing on the atolls farther southwest, Hao has an existing infrastructure that would facilitate the building of the farm (TI, 9 May 2014). The new site choice precipitated new controversies, however, since the project required the expropriation of land, which many of Hao’s inhabitants were not happy to give up (TI, 1 June 2014), having had many of their lands already expropriated for the military base.

Conflicts like these remind us of the complex issue of land tenure in the country, which has been a source of contention for more than a century, starting with the colonial superimposition of French civil law in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries over previously existing customary land systems. Land tenure issues also surfaced near the golf course in Atiamano, where Flosse ordered the eviction of families living on what the government considers public land in order to make place for another joint venture with Chinese capital (TI, 7 Jan 2014).

Another project that has long been in the planning stages by the Papeete Port Authority, supported by both previous and current country governments, is to upgrade the commercial port of Papeete to serve as a regional trade hub for the Southeastern Pacific, similar to the way Suva does for the Southwestern Pacific. However, TPM editor du Prel cautioned against being too optimistic about this scheme, since currently port operations are six times more expensive in Papeete than in Suva and since the potential foreign destinations to be supplied by Papeete (Cook Islands, Pitcairn, Christmas Island) are minimal in size, with merely one-tenth of the domestic population of French Polynesia and a much lower purchasing power, thus making a port with high costs of operation even less attractive for them (TPM, March 2014).

On 14 April, the government released a stimulus plan, elaborated by Vice President and Finance Minister Nuihau Laurey. It consisted mainly of a few suggestions to reduce bureaucracy, while at the same time creating new bureaucratic entities and new subsidies to stimulate economic growth but nothing that touches the basis of the economic system. Du Prel commented that local economy “essentially consists of a bubble fed
by the transfers and subsidies from France,” which feed an artificial system of economy based on consumption, a “colonial trading post economy that is limited to the urban population and the politico-administrative caste of Tahiti” (TPM, May 2014).

How important a major overhaul of the entire economic system and the creation of genuine economic growth would be is dramatically shown by the enormous French subsidies that constitute the lifeblood of the country. According to official statistics, in 2012 France spent 173.813 billion CFP francs (US$1.937 billion) in French Polynesia, of which only 42 percent was spent exercising French government responsibilities (defense, internal security, justice, audiovisual communication, tertiary education, etc), while 51 percent went toward the territorial government and 7 percent toward the municipalities (TPM, May 2014). While New Caledonia is moving away from such extreme levels of dependency, and socioeconomic reforms are slowly being implemented there, the structural problems of French Polynesia remain unsolved. As Regnault commented, “In [French] Polynesia it seems that, to the contrary, the elites entrench themselves behind their privileges and refuse any fundamental reform” (2013, 213).

As if the aggravating economic situation was not bad enough, the country was also plagued by tropical diseases. An epidemic of dengue hit Tahiti throughout 2013, and, in addition, for the first time there occurred an epidemic of the Zika virus, a disease similar to dengue but less virulent (TI, 31 Oct 2013), and later the Chikungunya virus from Africa was also imported (TI, 3 June 2014). All three diseases are mosquito-borne and thus more heavily affect the poorer sections of the population, who live in crowded shanty settlements on the bottom of valleys, with no window screens and surrounded by puddles and rubbish items that provide ideal breeding sites for mosquitoes.

As the poor neighborhoods are infested with mosquitoes, the ruling classes are infested with corruption. Reynald Temarii, the former Tahitian football star involved in a major corruption scandal of the Fédération Internationale du Football Association (FIFA) in 2010, once more featured in negative headlines, as he turned out to be one of the top FIFA officials who were bribed to award the 2022 World Cup to Qatar (TPM, June–July 2014). The more sinister affair of the alleged murder of anti-Flosse journalist Jean-Pascal Couraud (known by his byline, JPK) by henchmen of the presidential militia Groupement d’Intervention de la Polynésie (GIP) in 1997 received a new twist, as new testimony alleged that another former GIP member who committed suicide in 2003 had been part of the team, along with Tino Mara and Tutu Manate, who have been accused of having abducted and killed JPK in 1997 on orders of GIP commander Léonard Puputauki. At the end of the review period, the case was still under investigation, even though murder charges against Mara and Manate have been dropped (TPM, June–July, August 2014).

Flosse’s government created yet another controversy when it decided to remove a monument commemorating the victims of nuclear testing in the form of a marae (traditional place
of worship and burial), which had been built by the test victims association Moruroa e Tatou (MeT), from its prominent position in a seafront park. Whereas the Temaru government had renamed the park “2 July 1966” to commemorate the first nuclear test, Flosse decided to re-name it after former French President Jacques Chirac instead (TI, 12 June 2014). In a press release, MeT declared its shock and outrage. After the firing of nuclear-testing expert Bruno Barillot from his position in the government, the dissolution of the government’s Orientation Council for the Follow-up on the Consequences of Nuclear Testing (coscen), and the elimination of MeT representation in the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (cesc, a lawmaking advisory body consisting of civil society representatives), the removal of the monument was denounced as Flosse’s final insult to the victims of nuclear testing (TI, 16 June 2014).

To put a good face on the matter, shortly after the monument removal, the government celebrated the country’s pan-Polynesian connections, albeit in a cultural-only, politically “safe” way, by naming a neighboring seafront park after the visiting Hawaiian voyaging canoe Hōkūle’a. In the center of the park another marae was built, which President Flosse inaugurated by conferring the Order of Tahiti Nui on the Hōkūle’a’s navigator Nainoa Thompson (TI, Aug 2014).

A major change in the local media landscape occurred in May, when the daily newspaper Les Nouvelles de Tahiti stopped publishing after more than five decades in existence, due to bad financial management and competition from electronic media. Tahiti thus became a “one-newspaper island,” with La Dépêche remaining as the only daily. This is regretful, since Les Nouvelles usually provided deeper and more critical analyses of local politics (NT, 23 May 2014, TPM, June–July 2014).

The review period also saw the passing of three important local personalities. On 21 August 2013, Marc Maamaataiahutapu, more commonly known as Maco Tevane, passed away at age 76. A surveyor and government interpreter by profession, Tevane was one of the most prolific orators and authors in the Tahitian language and one of the cofounders in 1972 of the Tahitian Academy, of which he served as the president for many years (TPM, Sept 2013).

Another prolific writer in Tahitian and member of the Academy, Turo a Raapoto, died on 7 May 2014 at age 66. A trained linguist and theologian, Raapoto contributed to the academic study of the Tahitian language, for which he created one of the two currently used orthographic systems. Within the country’s largest religious denomination, which was then called the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia and under his influence became the Protestant Maohi Church in 2004, he was probably the most influential Tahitian intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century. Initially joined by his colleague Henri Hiro, Raapoto developed a Polynesian liberation theology, in which traditional Polynesian culture is syncretized with biblical ideas as a way of defending Maohi (native Polynesian) identity against French materialism and the
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destruction of sacred land through nuclear testing. As a key figure in the cultural renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, Raapoto promoted the term Maohi (hitherto rather obscure) as a self-designation for the indigenous population of the country. With more than a dozen theological and linguistic books published exclusively in Tahitian, Raapoto made a lasting contribution to the still meager corpus of high-quality Tahitian-language texts.

The country lost one of its political veterans providing links between current politics and those of the mid-twentieth century when, on 15 May, Jean-Baptiste Heitarauri Céran-Jérusalémy passed away at the remarkable age of 93 (DT, 16 May 2014). A printer and trade-union activist, Céran-Jérusalemy had assisted Pouvanaa a Oopa in the 1940s to found the party Rassemblement Démocratique des Populations Tahitiennes (RDPT), the first political movement to institutionalize Tahitian anticolonial nationalism and a predecessor to later autonomist and pro-independence parties. A colorful personality, Céran-Jérusalemy had been Pouvanaa’s deputy throughout most of the 1940s and 1950s but had then fallen out with the latter and actually campaigned against him in the 1958 referendum on the new French constitution, after which Pouvanaa was arrested and imprisoned. Since the 1960s, Céran-Jérusalemy had not been in elected office but, after reconciling with Pouvanaa, continued to support various political movements that he saw as carrying on Pouvanaa’s legacy, developing a pattern of frequently switching allegiances, which became a quasi-ubiquitous phenomenon in local political culture. Even toward the end of his life he continued this erratic course, only recently switching from Temaru’s Tavini Huiraatira to Gaston Tong Sang’s pro-French To Tatou Aia Party (now a part of ATP), yet professing to still be pro-independence and tirelessly advocating for a judicial rehabilitation of Pouvanaa.

Céran-Jérusalemy was lucky to witness before his passing one of the few positive actions by the French government during the review period, namely, steps toward retrying the 1959 case against Pouvanaa. After a colonial show trial on trumped-up charges, Pouvanaa had been sentenced to a decade of forced exile because France considered him a nuisance to its plans to build the nuclear-weapons testing facility that was being planned at the time. As a kind of would-be founding father of a nation on the verge of independence in the late 1950s, Pouvanaa is today regarded as a quasi-national hero by a wide political spectrum, epitomizing the tragic history of a country led astray from the regular path of decolonization by French nuclear neocolonialism.

In late February, French Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira announced that she would initiate a retrial (TI, 26 Feb 2013). Based on evidence gathered through the tireless research by historian Regnault in various hitherto classified French archives, the Assembly of French Polynesia had unanimously voted in early 2013 to send an official request to the Ministry of Justice for the retrial.

The affirmative reaction to the request, which was commended with great satisfaction by both Tahoeraa and UPLD, shows that the Hollande
administration can make a positive contribution to decolonization. It is regrettable that this attitude has not spread to other fields of French policy. To repeat Regnault’s statement, indeed in French Polynesia “decolonization still has a long history ahead.”

LORENZ GONSCHE

References


Before considering how decolonization manifests itself for Māori, we must pause to remember those we have lost over the past year. Among our leaders we bade farewell to were three who left important legacies. In September 2013, we lost Denis Hansen of the iwi (tribal nations) of Ngāti Kahu and Ngāpuhi. He had worked tirelessly for the Māori community and was a loveable rogue who lit up any gathering he walked into. Thousands of people had attended his eightieth birthday celebration in June.

In February 2014, we lost Nin Tomas of the Ngāti Kahu and Te Rarawa nations. As an associate professor of law, Nin had trained a generation of Māori lawyers, some of whom are now judges. They turned up in large numbers for her tangihanga (funerary ceremony) at the University of Auckland’s Waipapa marae. She had fought for recognition of the first law of New Zealand, tikanga Māori (Māori law), and its application to environmental issues.

In May 2014, Morvin Simon of Te Ātihaunui a Pāpārangi iwi passed away. He was a leading music composer and had dedicated his life to tutoring kapa haka (dance), composing songs, and preserving the language and customs of his people of the Whanganui.

For Māori, decolonization is about