Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events,
1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015
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Reviews of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Nauru, and Palau are not included in this issue.

**Federated States of Micronesia**

The period covered by this review was one of disruption and transition. The administration of President Emanuel “Manny” Mori wound down after eight years of fitful socioeconomic progress and frequent battles with the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) (Mulalap 2015, 211), but not before grappling with several body blows to the federation: three successive typhoons (including a super typhoon) and a strong push for secession by government officials and other political figures in Chuuk, one of the four states in the federation. To the end of its tenure, the Mori administration also strove to address various challenges of particular relevance for a small island developing state, including the conservation and sustainable use of limited natural resources, the combating of climate change, and the careful tending of fragile economic prospects. As the Mori administration gave way to the administration of President Peter M Christian, uncertainty and hope pervaded the federation, acknowledging the bruised relationships between the executive branch under the Mori administration and the FSM Congress as well as between the national government and the states of the federation, and signaling a renewed commitment to shoring up the FSM’s economic prospects in anticipation of the termination of the financial provisions of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) between the FSM and the United States in 2023.

The FSM endured a number of disruptions during the period under review, but perhaps the most serious disruption—and certainly the most widely discussed—was a secession push by the state of Chuuk. As befitting a loose federation made up of geographically dispersed and culturally distinct island groups, secession rumors have percolated through the federation since its inception, particularly for the states of Yap and Pohnpei, which are the more fiscally sound members of the federation and which frequently bemoan the financial burdens they shoulder on behalf of their counterparts in Chuuk and Kosrae. Those rumors, however, have yet to gel into concrete actions by the respective state governments. By contrast, the secession initiative in Chuuk took shape over several years through discrete legislative and executive actions and climaxed—for the time being—in a serious push for a plebiscite to formally launch negotiations for an independent republic of Chuuk. The story of that fractious and contentious secession process underscores, among other things, the fragility of the federation, the extreme economic problems in Chuuk, and the...
resentments between the FSM national government and the states to which that government is supposed to defer.

The Chuuk State Government formally initiated the Chuuk secession movement by establishing the Chuuk Political Status Commission (CPSC) in 2012, pursuant to Chuuk State Public Law 11-18 (CSL 11-12-08). Twelve individuals were eventually selected as CPSC voting members—ten selected by the five regional groups represented in the Chuuk State Legislature and two selected by the Chuuk State governor—to join the Chuuk State Senate president and the Speaker of the House of Representatives (who were nonvoting, ex-officio members). Among the members were Sabino Asor, the current attorney general of the State of Chuuk; Redley Killion, a former FSM vice president; and Kachutosy Paulus, the self-styled “Interim Governor of the Faichuuk Interim Government” (which had long advocated for admission to the FSM as a fifth state) and CPSC chairman (CPSC 2014a).

In accordance with Public Law 11-18, the primary CPSC mandate was to “review and recommend possible political status suitable for long term financial survival” of Chuuk after the expiration of the COFA economic provisions in 2023. The enabling legislation contemplated a range of status options, including Chuuk becoming a US territory or commonwealth or entering into free association with the United States (CSL 11-12-08). However, in early 2014, ostensibly to “accelerate its work and to move in the most practical and realistic direction,” the CPSC decided to focus its efforts on a single recommendation: Chuuk becoming a fully independent and sovereign republic (CPSC 2014a).

Only after arriving at this determination did the CPSC begin formulating a public education program on its sole recommendation for all of Chuuk’s forty municipalities and many communities abroad.

Public Law 11-18 gave the CPSC eighteen months from its inception in January 2013 to conduct its public education program before submitting its final report to the Chuuk State Legislature. In February 2014, recognizing that the CPSC had less than half a year remaining in its original mandate to conduct public hearings, the Chuuk State Government extended the mandate to twenty-five months, thus giving the CPSC approximately an extra year to fulfill its mandate (CSL 12-13-08). Despite that additional time, by November 2014 the CPSC had conducted only about half a dozen public hearings on its recommendation, mostly in Chuukese communities abroad (CSR 2015c). Nevertheless, ostensibly on the basis of those hearings and other internal discussions, the CPSC completed and submitted its final report to the Chuuk State Legislature by the end of November 2014. On 19 December 2014, several months before the CPSC’s mandate for public hearings was set to expire, a joint session of the Chuuk State Legislature accepted the CPSC’s final report with no amendments (CSR 2015d).

The final CPSC report to the Chuuk State Legislature is a bracing catalog of perceived political, legal, and socioeconomic harms suffered by Chuuk as an FSM state. The report dismisses all political status options other than secession as being “imprac-
tical, unrealistic or impossible.” By contrast, the report embraces secession in large part because it views the “existing FSM constitutional scheme [as] a major handicap in solving Chuuk’s serious development needs,” particularly with regard to supposed inequities in the FSM national government’s revenue allocation formulas for the four states as well as Chuuk’s inability to conduct its own foreign affairs in search of overseas development assistance. The report predicts that an independent Chuuk will enter into a bilateral treaty relationship with the United States that contains economic provisions similar to those of the Compact of Free Association, retain its shares of the trust funds established by the compact as well as independently by the FSM national government, and foster broader and more lucrative foreign direct investment in Chuuk. The report claims that the CPSC conducted fifty hearings on its recommendation for secession and that, “with rare exception, public informational hearings revealed strong majority support for a new independent Chuuk.” The report concludes with a roadmap to secession, beginning with a plebiscite in March 2015 to coincide with elections for the FSM Congress, followed (assuming a majority vote in favor of secession in the plebiscite) by the convening of a constitutional convention in mid-2015 and the production of a constitution for an independent Chuuk by October 2015, and culminating with a referendum on the proposed constitution in March 2017 (CPSC 2014b). The Chuuk State Legislature’s adoption of the CPSC’s final report on 19 December 2014 set in motion the planning for the March 2015 plebiscite. After gestating largely out of the public view for several years, the Chuuk secession movement was hurtling toward a pivotal vote—but it did so at a speed that confounded and infuriated many Chuukese.

After submitting its final report, the CPSC focused on lobbying Chuukese to vote in favor of secession in the March 2015 plebiscite. Jarringly, the expressions of support for Chuuk secession that the CPSC claimed to have received in its 2014 public hearings were practically nonexistent during the CPSC’s lobbying efforts for a favorable plebiscite outcome. In a series of public hearings in late 2014 and early 2015 in municipalities in Chuuk as well as in Chuukese communities abroad, the CPSC members faced strong pushback from Chuukese who complained that the CPSC did not conduct proper public consultations or produce comprehensive economic and legal analyses regarding the implications of Chuuk’s secession before the CPSC submitted its final report. Participants in the hearings were particularly incensed that the question of Chuuk’s secession was to be subjected to a plebiscite in March 2015, just a few short months into the future, with inadequate time for the general Chuukese public to debate the matter (CSR 2014).

Opposition to Chuuk secession swelled and took on numerous forms in the lead-up to the March 2015 plebiscite. A Change.org petition—which eventually garnered 1,500 signatures—was launched in December 2014 decrying the CPSC’s failure to consider all political status options in a comprehensive fashion and calling
on the Chuuk State Legislature and governor to halt the March 2015 plebiscite (Change.org 2014). On 27 January 2015, James T Stovall III, the legal counsel of the FSM embassy to the United States in Washington DC and the foremost legal expert on the Compact of Free Association, submitted a memorandum to President Mori that systematically undercut many of the claims made in the CPSC’s final report, particularly with regard to Chuuk’s continued entitlements to grant assistance, development programs and benefits, military defense, visa-free entry into the United States, and trust fund share under the compact (CSR 2015a). The FSM Department of Justice buttressed Stovall’s memorandum in its own February 2015 memorandum after a prominent Chuukese supporter of secession issued a lengthy rebuttal of Stovall’s memorandum; the Department of Justice’s memorandum highlighted, among other arguments, the FSM Constitution’s prohibition against secession (CSR 2015b). In response to public claims by CPSC members that the United States had held private discussions with the CPSC regarding a compact between the United States and an independent Chuuk, US Ambassador to the FSM Dorothea-Maria Rosen issued a statement in late January 2015 denying that any such discussions ever took place, at least with her knowledge and sanction (KP, 28 Jan 2015).

Perhaps the most striking campaign of opposition to Chuuk secession was waged by President Mori, himself a native of Chuuk. On 27 January 2015, Mori issued a presidential order that created a “Task Force on National Unity” comprising all the members of his cabinet as well as a number of other high-ranking government officials. In recognition of his “solemn duty to uphold the provisions of the FSM Constitution and protect the rights and interests of peoples and citizens of the [FSM],” President Mori ordered the task force to conduct a public education and awareness program for all Chuukese voters on “the legal, political, economic, and social issues” relating to the secession initiative, as well as the “likely consequences and impact to Chuukese citizens and the FSM” should Chuuk secede from the federation. Pointedly, the presidential order also instructed the task force to “promote and advance the principle of unity upon which the FSM Constitution is founded” (FSMP10, 28 Jan 2015). The task force promptly went to work, holding a number of public meetings with Chuukese communities in the FSM (FSMIS, 3 Feb 2015) and abroad (FSMP10, 20 Jan 2015) to counter CPSC lobbying efforts. President Mori led those task force meetings and also attended a number of CPSC public hearings in the FSM in January and February 2015, where he questioned the wisdom of the CPSC’s recommendation of secession and strongly advocated for the unity of the federation.

On 23 February 2015, Chuuk State Governor Johnson Elimo signed an executive order that severed the plebiscite on Chuuk secession from the March 2015 elections. Governor Elimo’s executive order cited the failure of the Chuuk Election Commission to print the ballots for the plebiscite in the manner required by law in time for the elections (KP, 25 Feb 2015). Although the execu-
tive order preserved the right of the Chuuk State Government to hold the plebiscite at a later date, it effectively halted the secession movement’s momentum, perhaps indefinitely. The extraordinary efforts of President Mori and his administration, coupled with widespread public dissatisfaction with the conduct of the CPSC’s work, succeeded in maintaining the unity of the federation, but the ordeal underscored the persistent political fragility of the federation.

While the FSM grappled with the Chuuk secession movement, it also dealt with disruptive storms of a more literal nature. Tropical Storm Hagupit formed near Kosrae on 29 November 2014 and gradually strengthened into a typhoon as it wove through the outer islands of Chuuk and Yap in early December (kp, 17 Dec 2014). Tropical Storm Noul formed southwest of Chuuk on 30 April and turned into a typhoon on 5 May as it passed over the islands of Yap, buffeting the state with high winds for more than twelve hours (Radio New Zealand 2015).

Neither Hagupit nor Noul could match the devastation wrought by Super Typhoon Maysak. Originating in the Marshall Islands on 23 March as a tropical storm, Maysak intensified into a category 1 typhoon as it reached Chuuk on 29 March. Winds gusting up to seventy miles per hour uprooted trees, knocked down power lines, and damaged approximately 80 to 90 percent of homes in the state (Mari-anas Variety, 31 March 2015). Crops throughout the state were extensively ruined, and freshwater sources were heavily contaminated by debris and saltwater inundation. Tragically, five people in Chuuk lost their lives under Maysak’s howling winds (Sydney Morning Herald 2015).

After wreaking havoc on Chuuk, Maysak strengthened into a super typhoon and, beginning on 31 March, proceeded to pummel several islands in the state of Yap, particularly the outer islands of Fais and Ulithi, which experienced wind speeds of up to 160 miles per hour. Ulithi suffered complete crop devastation, total power loss, and extensive debris and saltwater inundation of its freshwater supplies, while Fais suffered somewhat lesser (but still significant) devastation (kp, 2 April 2015). All told, Maysak wrought approximately $8.5 million in damage to public infrastructure in Chuuk and Yap, caused five fatalities, devastated 80 to 90 percent of food crops and freshwater systems, and affected nearly thirty thousand people—about a third of the FSM population (usaid 2015).

In the aftermath of Maysak’s passage through the FSM, Governor Johnson Elimo of Chuuk and Governor Tony Ganngiyan of Yap declared states of emergency for their respective states, and President Mori issued a Declaration of Emergency for both states. On 28 April, pursuant to a formal request from President Mori, US President Barack Obama signed a disaster declaration for the FSM, thereby making programmatic and financial assistance available to the FSM under the Compact of Free Association (White House 2015).

The FSM Congress, at President Mori’s request, convened a two-day special session from 9 April to 11 April in which it appropriated $1.5 million for disaster relief in Yap and
Chuuk. The appropriation was a sharp reduction of the president’s original budget request of $4.8 million, most of which would have gone toward a thirty-day feeding program for the people on the most heavily affected islands in Chuuk and Yap. Members of Congress justified the reduced appropriation by citing the need for a more comprehensive assessment of damage in Chuuk and Yap before Congress could appropriate additional disaster relief (FSMIS, 13 April 2015). However, an extensive situation report detailing Maysak’s damage and outlining the needs of the affected populations had actually been completed by the FSM Office of Environment and Emergency Management on 6 April, several days before Congress convened its special session (OEEM 2015). It is unclear whether that report was transmitted to Congress in time for its special session, and if so, whether Congress considered the report to be unsatisfactory or chose to engage in the usual political gamesmanship with the Mori administration.

Super Typhoon Maysak had the dubious distinction of helping to set a meteorological record for the most typhoons ever recorded in the western Pacific in the first quarter of the year (Valentine 2015). Although the science is still unclear on whether climate change leads to more storms, there is wider agreement among scientists that climate change will likely lead to an increase in the intensity of storms and typhoons as ocean water warms and feeds storm systems (IPCC 2013). Indeed, the March 2015 global sea-surface temperature average was the third-highest ever measured in 136 years of record keeping (NOAA 2015b)—a measurement that came on the heels of findings that the 2014 global sea-surface temperature average was the highest ever recorded, despite the absence of El Niño conditions in the Pacific that year (NOAA 2015a).

The devastation of Maysak reaffirmed, to a visceral degree, remarks that President Mori delivered on separate occasions during his last visit to the United Nations as FSM president. On 23 September 2014, Mori participated in the UN Secretary-General’s Climate Summit, a high-level meeting focused on generating commitments in anticipation of a new international climate-change agreement in December 2015. Mori delivered remarks that stressed the imperative to “catalyze the ambitious and fast action needed to address the devastating impacts of climate change,” including “sea-level rise [and] more frequent and intense typhoons” (FSMPIO, 23 Sept 2014). On 26 September, Mori delivered his final address as FSM president to the General Debate of the UN General Assembly, an annual gathering at which heads of state and government as well as other high-ranking government officials discuss a wide range of issues. Mori’s address underscored the many challenges afflicting small island developing states like the FSM, particularly climate change, sustainable development, and the careful management of limited and valuable natural resources. Mori noted a litany of actions taken by the FSM to address climate change and its root causes, including a national energy policy aiming to convert at least 30 percent of the FSM energy infrastructure into renewable energy by 2020; a national climate act that mainstreams climate-
change measures and considerations in every national government policy; and a push for an amendment to the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer to phase down the production and use of hydrofluorocarbons and other short-lived but highly potent climate pollutants (FSMPIO, 26 Sept 2014).

President Mori rooted his final UN address in a fundamental conviction: “We are all stewards of God’s Creation here on Earth. The bounties of Mother Nature are priceless. We all bear the obligation to sustainably manage them” (FSMPIO, 26 Sept 2014). The FSM’s efforts to achieve and promote sustainable development in the federation and in the broader Pacific region took various forms throughout the period covered in this review. From 1 to 4 September 2014, Mori led a sizable delegation of FSM government officials and representatives to the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, held in Apia, Sāmoa. The outcome document of the conference—the Samoan Pathway—focused on building “genuine and durable partnerships” between small island developing states and developed countries with regard to sustainable development. President Mori delivered remarks during the conference that encouraged new, additional, and reliable funding and capacity building assistance from the FSM’s partners to aid in the country’s sustainable development efforts, including renewable energy infrastructure development and agricultural production (FSMIS, 25 Sept 2014).

In the margins of the conference, Mori joined Palau President Thomas Remengesau Jr and Marshall Islands President Christopher Loeak in signing the treaty establishing the Micronesian Trade and Economic Community (MTEC). The MTEC’s primary purpose is to promote “sub-regional trade and economic cooperation and integration to support the achievement of sustainable and equitable socio-economic development of its Member States and improve the standard and quality of life of their People.” Citing the challenges of the copra industry in the member states, President Remengesau predicted that the MTEC, if successful, could aid in consolidating raw materials for agricultural production and creating suitable economies of scale for private-sector industries (FSMIS, 4 Sept 2014).

Fisheries continued to command a sizable share of the FSM’s sustainable development efforts, not to mention its annual domestic revenues. The FSM is a Party to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) that manages the sizable tuna stocks controlled by PNA members as well as the stocks in high-seas pockets ringed by the exclusive economic zones of those members. Pursuant to the Nauru Agreement, a fishing vessel must buy so-called fishing days from a PNA member in order to fish in the exclusive economic zone of that PNA member. The PNA establishes a total number of fishing days for all PNA members as well as a minimum rate for each fishing day and then allocates those fishing days to individual PNA members for their sale to fishing vessels. The total number of fishing days is based on the best available scientific evidence about the health of tuna stocks in the waters covered by the Nauru Agreement.

For 2015, the PNA established the
maximum number of fishing days at approximately 46,610 and set a minimum rate of $8,000 for each fishing day (KP, 19 Aug 2014). For 2016, the minimum daily rate will remain the same as in 2015, but the total number of fishing days will decrease by approximately 700 days, in response to concerns about the health of certain tuna stocks (PNA 2015b). Through careful stewardship and canny pricing, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement are able to limit the number of fishing days available to fishing fleets and charge appropriately high rates for those days, thereby generating revenues from enforced scarcity. To wit, the FSM earned $30 million from selling its fishing days in 2013 and approximately $50 million in 2014, when the minimum rate for each fishing day was $6,000 (FSMIS, 30 Sept 2014). After decades of mismanaging its domestic fishery sector, the FSM has started to generate sizable revenues from its most lucrative natural resource in a steady and sustainable manner.

The FSM’s push for the sustainable management of its fish stocks received welcome support from an advisory opinion delivered by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea on 2 April 2015. The advisory opinion stated, among other things, that a country or international organization that flags a fishing vessel has a due diligence obligation under international law to ensure that the fishing vessel does not engage in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the exclusive economic zones of third-party countries (ITLOS 2015). The tribunal’s advisory opinion largely echoed arguments advanced by the FSM during the written and oral proceedings for the advisory opinion (ITLOS 2013). The FSM’s participation in the proceedings marked the first time that the country had ever engaged with an international legal tribunal—a testament to the importance that the FSM places on the health of its fish stocks and the need to curb rampant IUU fishing in its national waters.

Another high-water mark in the FSM’s sustainable management of its natural environment was the establishment of a nationwide shark sanctuary. Sharks, as apex predators, play crucial roles in regulating marine biodiversity and maintaining the health of marine ecosystems, in addition to generating millions of dollars in tourism revenues (Pew Charitable Trusts 2015). After the four states in the federation established shark sanctuaries in their own twelve-nautical-mile territorial seas in the previous four years, the FSM Congress passed legislation on 4 February 2015 that created a national shark sanctuary spanning the FSM’s entire two-hundred-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. Pursuant to the legislation, the commercial fishing of sharks in FSM waters as well as the removal of fins from sharks caught in those waters are absolutely prohibited, and any sharks inadvertently caught in FSM waters by commercial operators must be returned to sea (if alive) or brought to shore (if dead) with all fins attached. Any dead sharks brought to shore will be repurposed as livestock feed for local communities (FSM Eighteenth Congress, Bill 18-134). President Mori signed the legislation into law on 25 February 2015, marking the culmination of years of work and advocacy by scientists, conservationists, commu-
nity leaders, and government officials (FSMPIO, 4 March 2015).

The close cooperation between state and national officials and entities on a matter of mutual interest such as the establishment of a national shark sanctuary belied persisting tensions between the Mori administration and members of the FSM Congress, particularly with regard to congressional appropriations. On 3 March 2015, President Mori exercised a line-item veto on a supplemental budget measure passed by Congress that defunded the 2023 Investment Development Fund, which the Mori administration envisioned to be the primary source of complementary funding for private-sector development initiatives in the FSM (FSMPIO, 17 March 2015). On 11 March 2015, Mori vetoed, in its entirety, a congressional act to appropriate nearly $3 million for public projects in the four states of the FSM. President Mori stressed the need for Congress to engage in transparent public hearings and consultations before appropriating funds for public projects, as well as to ensure that appropriations are properly implemented (FSMPIO, 11 March 2015). Despite Mori’s pointed remarks and justifications, Congress overrode both of his vetoes, providing more evidence of the strained relations between the executive and legislative branches of the federation that plagued most of President Mori’s administration.

The president’s concerns about congressional appropriations stemmed in part from a recent audit report from the FSM Office of the National Public Auditor (FSMONPA) that inspected public projects and social programs funded by Congress pursuant to Public Law 17-68. According to the 9 February 2015 audit report, out of approximately $4.2 million appropriated under Public Law 17-68 for public projects and social programs in fiscal year 2013, $1.6 million went toward public projects “which did not yield any meaningful and lasting public benefits”; almost $700,000 was used in a manner that “lacked transparency and accountability”; and about $250,000 was expended in a manner “not in compliance with laws and regulations.” In his executive summary for the report, FSM National Public Auditor Haser Hainrick stressed that despite “veto messages year after year, penned by the former and current Presidents, and highlighting the urgent need to refocus Congress appropriation to public projects that support National priorities, . . . it remains business as usual” in terms of congressional appropriations for poorly defined and improperly implemented public projects and social programs. After presenting a litany of expenditures made using funds appropriated for public projects—eg, sacks of rice, cases of chicken, cigarettes, personal home gardens, personal motor vehicles, airline tickets—Hainrick pointedly noted: “People are asking, why is Congress wasting public funds on expenses that are for personal needs rather than for any public purpose?” (FSMONPA 2015).

The audit report triggered strong—even furious—responses from Dohsis Halbert, the Speaker of the FSM Congress. In his initial written response to the findings of the report (which was included in the final version of the report), Halbert questioned whether it was appropriate to blame Congress
for the faulty implementation of public projects, given the fact that allottees rather than Congress members were responsible for the use of appropriations. Halbert then wondered aloud whether the audit report’s findings were essentially parroting “political criticism that the Executive [Branch] levies at Congress” (FSMONPA 2015). After the audit report was released to the public, the Speaker issued a follow-up letter that took offense at the pointed language used by Hainrick in his executive summary for the report. Halbert called Hainrick’s language “political rhetoric,” “inflammatory,” and “misleading.” And with a conspiratorial flourish, Halbert accused Hainrick of timing the release of the audit report to influence the congressional elections in March 2015—elections in which, according to Speaker Halbert, there would be one candidate who was closely related to a member of the team that produced the audit report (KP, 9 Feb 2015).

It is unclear whether the Speaker truly believed the accusations he levied against Hainrick or was just employing his own form of political rhetoric. Whether the audit report had the effect that Speaker Halbert warned it would have is perhaps slightly clearer: In the March 2015 congressional elections, all the incumbents who ran for reelection won back their seats—except Speaker Halbert, who lost to newcomer Ferny Perman (KP, 9 March 2015).

With the congressional elections complete, the focus shifted to the selection of the next FSM president and vice president as well as the presiding officers and committee chairmen of the FSM Congress. Pursuant to the FSM Constitution, only the 4 members of Congress elected to four-year terms (as opposed to the other 10 members of Congress elected to two-year terms) are eligible to become president and vice president, as selected by Congress in a private caucus. (There is no direct election of the FSM president and vice president.) As could be expected with such a secretive process, there was rampant speculation among the general public about who would be selected for the executive branch. Such speculation went into overdrive when, on 9 May 2015, in one of his last formal acts in office, President Mori pardoned ten individuals, almost all from Chuuk, including former members of the FSM Congress who had been convicted of crimes relating to the improper use of public funds (FSMIS, 9 May 2015). Several of the individuals pardoned by President Mori are considered power players in Chuukese politics, and it was conceivable that President Mori issued his pardons in part to secure political support in case the four-year Chuukese member of Congress was selected to be president or vice president. Such a selection would vacate the member’s four-year seat and require a new election in Chuuk to fill the seat, an election for which President Mori could conceivably stand.

Ultimately, Congress selected Peter M Christian of Pohnpei as president and Yosiwo P George of Kosrae as vice president. The four-year Chuukese member of Congress, Wesley Simina, was selected to be the new Speaker of the FSM Congress, the first time that a four-year member had ever been elevated to the speakership (Simina retains his four-year seat in Congress.
during his speakership) (KP, 11 May 2015). Whether Simina’s selection as Speaker was due to his personal qualifications or a political calculation by Congress to block former President Mori from returning to Congress is a question left for speculation.

With the selection of President Christian and Vice President George—two seasoned veterans of Congress with long histories of government service—Congress signaled its desire to move beyond the sniping between the executive and legislative branches that had characterized much of the Mori administration and to focus on establishing a solid and sustainable economic foundation for the FSM ahead of the scheduled termination of COFA grant assistance in 2023. The initial activities of the Christian administration seemed to comport with that orientation. On 15 May 2015, in his first official meeting with Congress after his elevation to the executive branch, President Christian underscored his administration’s commitment to harmony and collaboration in the working relationship between his administration and Congress (FSMIS, 15 May 2015). On 11 June, continuing the Mori administration’s work on environmental protection and sustainable natural-resource management, President Christian opened a two-day ministerial meeting in Pohnpei of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement by exhorting the ministers to remain strong in their custodianship of the ocean’s tuna resources. Alluding to the temptations of “inappropriate generosity by unscrupulous players” in the tuna fishing industry, President Christian challenged the ministers “to be innovative and creative, be willfully strong and continue exploring ways in which to ensure our most valuable asset can continue to be effectively useful now and for the future” (PNA 2015a). And on 17 June, President Christian formally received newly appointed Assistant Secretary Esther Kia’aaina of the US Department of Interior during her first official visit to the FSM. In the meeting, President Christian recalled his days as the FSM’s lead negotiator in its renegotiation of COFA financial provisions with the United States in 2001–2003 and stressed the FSM’s historical commitment to pursuing sustainable economic development, a mission greatly imperiled by severe lags in infrastructural development due in part to strict conditions placed by the United States on infrastructure funding under the compact. Assistant Secretary Kia’aaina was noncommittal regarding the easing of infrastructure funding, but she promised to foster a collaborative and good-faith partnership between the FSM and the United States, as envisioned by the compact (FSMIS, 17 June 2015).

The Mori administration focused sharply on private-sector development and post-2023 economic planning and also championed environmental protection, but its efforts were sometimes stymied by Congress for various economic and political reasons. With the transition to the Christian administration underway, it remains to be seen whether the efforts of the Mori administration will be expanded or rejected in favor of a new approach. Whatever approach the Christian administration takes will have profound lasting effects for the federation. Assuming that the Christian administration secures a second consecutive four-year term, it will complete its time in office just as COFA financial
provisions expire in 2023—a year that looms large in the FSM as a time of momentous transition and, perhaps, as the ultimate disruptor in the political, social, and economic affairs and fortunes of a fragile federation.

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The opinions expressed in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the government of the Federated States of Micronesia.

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