

Political Reviews

*Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2018
to 30 June 2019*

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Reviews of Kiribati and Palau are not included in this issue.

FEDERATED STATES
OF MICRONESIA

The period under review featured three major themes that continue to affect the future of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). They include climate change, China's presence in the northwest Pacific, and the independence movement by Chuuk State. These topical issues highlight the ongoing challenges that have yet to be resolved by the FSM but must be addressed in order to protect its future integrity.

In March 2019, a new administration came to power after congressman-at-large David Panuelo won the election in Pohnpei State. He defeated the previous president, Peter Christian, after a very intense election campaign. Many political observers claimed that Christian lost the election because of his son-in-law's involvement in a financial bribery scandal. The son-in-law, who worked for the FSM Department of Transportation, Communication and Infrastructure, bribed Hawai'i businessman Frank James Lyon on several occasions in exchange for Lyon to secure a contract to undertake road construction in the FSM (*PIT*, 12 March 2019). He was arrested at Honolulu International Airport by FBI officials and later jailed in a US federal prison for his actions. Christian, however, regained the at-large seat after Panuelo vacated

it to become the new president of the FSM. President Panuelo and Christian will be contesting the seat again in 2023. Despite this new administration, the FSM is pressing on with confronting its challenges to its future.

Climate change remained under an intense political spotlight in 2018–2019, particularly after many of the FSM's low-lying islands experienced an increasing number of king tides and storms, which caused serious damage to properties, agricultural crops, and drinking water. The looming threat has been sea-level rise, which has been presenting ongoing challenges for the people of the FSM. Adaptation to climate change has required the people of the FSM to resort to their traditional knowledge of conservation, in addition to new and low-cost technical knowledge borrowed from the outside world. Adaptation is urgent; without it, Islanders' prospects for continuing to live in the sea environment would be in question. The use of Indigenous environmental knowledge, such as elevating taro patches, using copra fibers to plant crops, digging canals using locally designed drainage systems, and following the topography of the land, exemplifies Islanders' persistence, strength, and ongoing use of local devices for adapting to consequences of climate change.

The people of the FSM are closely connected to the sea, on which many of their livelihoods depend. This dependency on the sea means that those living on low-lying islands and

around the coastal areas on the high islands are keenly aware of the land's fragility and the impacts of climate change. It has affected their livelihoods and thus their health. Islanders are historically the custodians of their islands, a role they have been practicing since time immemorial. They are expert conservationists with a deep understanding of the land and sea environment, having made the islands their home many centuries ago. They understand that their environment demands constant, delicate management to keep their limited resources in equilibrium. Conservation thus means having a holistic understanding of human behavior toward the physical environment, an intricate knowledge of the changing weather system, and an ability to utilize the best available, culturally compatible practices (Samson 2019).

In response to the threats arising from climate change, the FSM government has adopted a policy that identifies survivability as an uncompromising priority. In its official policy statement, the FSM government stated that its role is "to mitigate climate change . . . at the international level, and adaptation at . . . community levels to reduce the FSM's vulnerability to climate change's adverse impacts" (Federated States of Micronesia 2009, 1). Mitigation means, among other things, the promotion of the Paris Accord, which calls for reducing emissions in order to control temperature rise, as advocated by the "Tuvalu Deal" (ie, keeping world temperature increase below 2.5 degrees Celsius to give the low-lying islands in the Pacific a chance to prolong their survivability). The FSM government has also

required all development activities to embrace new recommendations for project design that comply with the FSM's strategic development plan; to use ecosystem-based approaches to encourage and strengthen the application of local knowledge and conservation practices; and to implement strategies as soon as possible to improve food and water security (Puas 2015).

The national government continues to advance its legislation adopted in February 2013 to reinforce its climate-change policy. The legislation's purpose is to provide a nationwide integrated disaster and climate change adaptation network, as well as to require relevant departments—such as the Department of Resources and Development; the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Emergency Management; and the Department of Transportation, Communication, and Infrastructure—to implement the national policy. It further demands that "every year . . . the President of the Federated States of Micronesia shall submit a report to Congress on the progress of the implementation of the CC [Climate Change] Policy, and recommend additional legislation where applicable and necessary" (FSM Public Law 18-34, 3; Puas 2015). This policy illustrates the seriousness of the FSM government's resolve to tackle climate change by creating and enforcing a legal framework for the FSM to systematically implement its adaptation strategies. As the policy states, "to successfully attain the goals of this Policy requires . . . [the] support of all levels of governments in the FSM, the civil societies . . . private sector, [local]

communities and traditional leaders” (Federated States of Micronesia 2009, 4). Furthermore, the FSM is seeking assistance and support regionally and internationally to ensure that its adaptation goals are strategically implemented with successful outcomes.

The growing corpus of evidence documenting the adverse impacts of global warming on small island states has prompted the FSM government to take an active role in the international arena, calling on industrialized nations to be mindful of their greenhouse gas emissions and the role of greenhouse gases in climate change. The FSM has signed major international agreements that are related to climate change and has participated in regional organizations, such as the Pacific Forum, to promote its agendas with like-minded oceanic nations (Moufa 2019).

The FSM’s diplomatic relations with China remain essentially bilateral. This relationship secured a significant increase in Chinese aid to the FSM in 2017–2018. Chinese assistance has resulted in a series of infrastructure projects, such as the construction of public buildings, and the development of state government projects, and it has also provided a series of smaller, targeted grants to support infrastructure projects in local communities (Illon 2019). These projects have largely been based in and around the state capitals, including Kolonia, Pohnpei, and Weno, Chuuk. For example, in 2018, China completed a groundbreaking complex for government offices in Nantaku, Chuuk. China was also keen to provide further assistance to the four state governments as they planned

for future infrastructure development projects.

Although Chinese assistance is well received by the FSM, the United States remains the major contributor to Micronesian development programs (Sivas 2019). China’s assistance to the FSM since it opened diplomatic relations is estimated to be more than US\$170 million, compared to the more than US\$7 billion provided by the United States (Brandt 2015). However, China’s policy of political noninterference in the FSM’s governance—unlike the United States, as exemplified by its control of Compact of Free Association funds through the Joint Economic Management Committee (JEMCO)—has led to FSM leaders embracing China’s persistent offer to be an economic partner.

China’s consultative approach to funding infrastructure, as requested by both the national and state governments, is a dramatic contrast to the United States’ domination of the budget and allocation of compact monies. China has earned a reputation for being sensitive to local needs and respectful of the FSM’s aspirations as a developing nation. The FSM understands that China is also a developing nation, and its aid policy continues to be open and practical (Sivas 2019). China’s aid is aimed at strengthening economic ties, trade, and investment with the FSM, and it has projected a positive perception of China in the federation.

In the period under review, China’s engagement with the FSM continued to figure prominently in small-scale aid projects for individual institutions that are below the level of national and state governments, such as by

providing low-cost technical advice, which is essential in the nation's adaptation agendas. China has also developed a number of pilot farms and road construction programs, for example, in Madolenihmw and Nett Municipalities in Pohnpei, and has also provided technical advice on small-scale pilot projects, such as piggeries and biogas technology. A large and imposing gymnasium has been completed in the heart of Kolonia, the capital of Pohnpei State. Finally, China has continued to offer essential aid programs in various areas, such as promoting the idea of developing "hybrid" coconut farms, so as to help the FSM achieve its sustainable future development goals (Mori 2019). This is counter to the generally negative reporting in Western media and academic literature in the Pacific.

The increasing Chinese assistance to the FSM has also been highlighted in the education and health sectors. Educational exchange programs for students and high-ranking officials are also an important part of China's policy, especially in enhancing China's understanding of the FSM's culture and its intention to remain one of the FSM's economic partners, similar to China's relationships with other Pacific nations. From 2014 to the present, the Chinese government has granted over one hundred full scholarships to FSM students to study in China (Mori 2019), and the number grew in 2017–2018. In the health sector, Chinese medical experts visited the FSM and offered needed health services to local people, for example, in Chuuk State.

Until late 2019, the FSM was the

only country in the Micronesian region that had diplomatic relations with China. China's growing influence in the FSM has been met with optimism at the top level of the FSM government. However, in interviews I conducted in 2017–2018, several anonymous government officials continued to speculate that China is using the FSM as a means to develop its strategic presence in the region. China has dismissed this claim, stating that its presence in the FSM is based on mutual respect and common interests as developing nations. In my personal conversations with many government officials and diplomats, many said that China is not in the FSM for future military planning. Many of them think that the United States should engage with China rather than fear it. Still, many do not want to be identified publicly, fearing repercussions from their superiors for making comments outside of government policy.

Two previous Chinese ambassadors to the FSM explained to me during interviews that they are aware that there is a strong relationship between the United States and the FSM. They noted that China shares the FSM's foreign policy as expressed in the preamble to the FSM Constitution, which states, "We extend to all nations what we seek from each: peace, friendship, cooperation, and love in our common humanity" (FSM Constitution 1978; see also Zhang 2017).

The FSM is a region of competing interests between two external powers—China and the United States. However, China has been demonized as the "Red Dragon," ready to create disequilibrium in the region (Sivas 2019). The FSM seeks friendship

with all powers in order to develop its own best interests. However, this principle will be tested by circumstances in which friendly powers act in ways contrary to the FSM's perceived interests. For example, a Chinese fishing vessel, *Ping Da 7*, ran aground on Nankapenparam Reef in Pohnpei State in December 2013. A state of emergency was declared out of concern for the environmental threat to the reef and its marine life posed by leaking fuels and chemicals from the *Ping Da 7*. The ship's owner, Ping Jianghai, indicated that he had no intention of taking full responsibility for salvaging the boat, much less collaborating in undertaking preventative measures to avoid environmental harm (Mori 2019; FSM Updates 2014). This kind of arrogant response could jeopardize relationships between the two nations. The bottom line is that Micronesia must decide its own future in terms of which countries to associate with and which to disassociate itself from. China is not an exception in this decision-making process.

The political imbroglio in Chuuk State over its desire to leave the federation continues to split the public into two extreme camps. At the heart of this debate is the view by proponents of the independence movement, who claim that Chuuk State will not survive if it remains with the federation after 2023, when the financial provisions of the compact will come to an end. They further assert that independence for Chuuk will enable it to live within its own economic means. The problem with this claim, however, is that such an act involves the usurpation of the spirit, scope, and textual languages of the FSM Con-

stitution. It is the FSM Constitution that will be the battleground for any attempt to secede from the federation. The leaders of the pro-independence movement have condemned the FSM Constitution as nothing more than a convenient document used by the forefathers as a vehicle to facilitate their earlier wish for a federation (Puas 2018b; Mori 2019). They argue that such a case no longer applies today, especially when a state, like Chuuk, wishes to determine its own future. This is in spite of the fact that self-determination was supported by Chuuk residents in 1978, when they voted to be a part of the FSM.

Self-determination was then sealed in 1979. Today, the independence movement has invented an issue where one did not previously exist (Puas 2018b). For example, the Chuuk State Political Status Commission has proposed a two-step process in which Chuuk first disengages or disassociates itself from the federation and then enters into a separate compact with the United States—a proposal many political observers have referred to as the “Compact of Dis-Association and Re-Association” (Puas 2018b). However, the commission has provided no legal basis for attempting to disassociate Chuuk from the rest of the federation, whether under national or international law, and it has failed to identify any legal precedent for Chuuk to become an independent republic.

The constitution provides points of reference for citizens to rely on when confronted with complex issues from both within and outside of the FSM, and it epitomizes Micronesian independence, reconciles internal differences, and asserts a distinct

politico-cultural identity. It also represents a Micronesian-centered outlook in terms of the federation's future economic viability, the Compact of Free Association, foreign relations, climate change, globalization, secession movement, and leadership issues (Puas 2018a). The future success of the FSM can be found in the depth of its own historical experiences, which ensure the perpetuation of control, self-preservation, and continuity (Puas 2015). Differences in opinions between the state and the national governments often arise because of jurisdictional issues, and this is not new. Domestic debates, however, are essential steps toward developing the FSM's social and political health; they provide opportunities for self-evaluation and thus the resolution of complex issues.

The Chuuk State Political Status Commission is testing the FSM's strength, integrity, and continuity. However, what the commission does not have, according to many, is a historical appreciation of the hard work of the forefathers and what they had to shoulder in order to propel the FSM onto the international stage. This is not written in the annals of Micronesian colonial history, and deep intellectual engagement with the historical literature is required for one to begin to understand genuine Micronesian perspectives (Illon 2019).

Many observers have predicted that Chuuk's independence will not succeed. That is because the principal issues for independence are deeper than mere economic ideals. For example, the commission has expressed a desire for Chuuk to be economically independent, but it has not suggested or provided any plausible economic

model for Chuuk that would enable it to sustain itself into the future.

The economic outlook for the imagined Republic of Chuuk would rely heavily on foreign aid sources and a separate compact with the United States. However, a fatal problem with that plan is that the United States has stated unreservedly that it will not enter into a separate compact with Chuuk. The commission has ignored a statement to that effect from the US ambassador and continues to mislead the public, asserting that the United States will somehow change its mind in the future.

The commission is revisiting old rhetoric regarding the division of the FSM economic pie, reasserting that Chuuk should have the lion's share of the federation's funds since it is the most populous state. It also blames the other states for draining the nation's purse through chronic mismanagement and suggests that this is the reason for Chuuk's present dire financial position. The push for independence, some have argued, is a political ploy used by the prime leaders of the secession movement to maximize their personal chances of becoming the main beneficiaries in the imagined Republic of Chuuk (Mori 2019).

The commission understands that its reckless behavior will trigger the beginning of the end of what we know as Chuuk State. Chuuk is therefore sitting on the edge of a cliff ready to inflict self-harm, which will eventually lead to the fragmentation of the Chuuk State itself (Puas 2018b). For example, no one genuinely knows what action the other regions, such as the Mortlocks and Northwest of Chuuk, will consider in the pursuit

of their own regional interests. This stems from the fact that each municipality has an inherent right, under the Chuuk Constitution, to self-determination. If self-determination is the premise on which the commission relies in the pursuit of Chuuk independence, then the same argument equally applies to each of the municipalities within Chuuk with respect to their own futures (Puas 2018b).

The US ambassador to the FSM, Robert Annan Riley, traveled to Chuuk State in early July 2018 to clarify the United States' position in relation to the commission's suggestion that a separate compact be forged between the United States and the imagined Republic of Chuuk. In response, he was accused of intervening in the political process of Chuuk and its desire for independence. Further, Ambassador Riley's comments resulted in angry outbursts toward him personally, as exemplified by the remarks of the commission's spokesperson, wherein he stated that nowhere in the compact does it allow the ambassador of either the FSM or the United States to go into the other country to directly and personally participate in the political process in order to influence the outcome of a local election or plebiscite (Asor 2018, 5).

The commission was subsequently called out by the public on the question of a separate compact with the United States, which has not agreed to such a deal (Puas 2018b). It has also apparently dawned on the commission that its proponents will lose their financial assistance without a compact with the United States. Its economic dream is quickly evaporating into a

distant memory, yet the commission continues to drive a movement toward a republic that would be isolated (Walter 2019).

Inos Walter commented that the fact remains that Chuuk is a part of the FSM, and it cannot unilaterally disassociate from the FSM outside of the provisions of the FSM Constitution (2019). Moreover, the commission was dissolved on 31 March 2016, pursuant to legislation under which it was created, and cannot legitimately continue to operate and voice an "authoritative" view. The commission must stop confusing the Chuukese population with unattainable and self-promoting dreams of independence when it is neither simple nor better economically for the population of Chuuk. The commission needs to come to the sobering reality that the public can no longer tolerate its push for independence.

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GUAM

The year 2018–2019 in Guam began on a high note with a series of landmark elections and ended more forebodingly with a federal court case threatening the rights of the island’s Indigenous people.

November 2018 saw the victory of Democrat Lourdes “Lou” Leon Guerrero as the island’s first female governor. For centuries, chief executives on island have been referred to as “maga’lāhi,” a colonial appropriation of the CHamoru term for a male leader. With Leon Guerrero’s election, she assumed for the first time in modern history the title of “maga’hāga,” or female leader (*PDN*, 7 Nov 2018). Leon Guerrero led a local “blue wave” of Democrats who seized a super majority (ten out of fifteen) seats in I Liheslaturan Guåhan (Guam Legislature). Among those elected was former journalist Clynt Ridgell, the first Guam-elected leader of Chuukese descent (*PDN*, 7 Jan 2019). Leon Guerrero’s lieutenant governor, Joshua Tenorio, became the first openly gay man in US history to hold that position.

In I Liheslaturan Guåhan, ten of the officials elected were women, including seven Democrats and three