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FRENCH POLYNESIA

The most important events during the year under review were the territorial elections of late April and early May 2018, in which Édouard Fritch, after essentially ruling as a usurper for the last four years, was able to consolidate his power as the country’s new strongman by receiving a democratic mandate. Besides the elections, the period

remained relatively calm and without major upheavals. While the tourism economy seems to be slowly recovering, two controversial economic mega-projects remain hotly debated. On the international level, French defiance of UN resolutions on the territory appears to continue unabated under the Macron administration.

The review period began with a new boost of international acknowledgment for the country, and by extension the Pacific region at large, when on 9 July the Executive Council of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), at a meeting in Krakow, Poland, declared Marae Taputapuatea, a historical temple complex on the island of Raiatea, a World Heritage Site. For several years, cultural organizations on Raiatea as well as several local politicians had been campaigning for the temple's listing, and with their lobbying the nomination of the site slowly progressed. For the final decision, both the President of French Polynesia Édouard Fritch and the mayor of the Taputapuatea municipality on Raiatea, Thomas Moutame, traveled to Krakow to be present at the historic occasion (*TI*, 9 July 2017).

Marae Taputapuatea is an outstanding example of Polynesian megalithic architecture, with walls made out of coral stone slabs of a height of up to 3.5 meters each. The temple complex also has a regional importance that transcends today's political boundaries, as it was one of the most important spiritual and cultural centers of Eastern Polynesia during the centuries before European contact, with oral histories and temple names in other parts of French Polynesia, the

Cook Islands, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Hawai'i referring to the site.

The inscription of Taputapuatea as a World Heritage Site marks what is so far the highest level of increasing institutional recognition of traditional Polynesian culture and spirituality. While Christian influence had for about two centuries obscured and denigrated many aspects of that culture, it is increasingly coming back in full force (Saura 2009). During the review period, one of the leading figures in the contemporary spiritual revival movement, Sunny Moanaura Walker—who unapologetically identifies as a “pagan”—gained widespread recognition when a known local author published a biography about him (Ariirau 2017).

A more problematic aspect of Taputapuatea's world heritage listing, however, is that as long as the country remains a French dependency, UNESCO considers France, not the country government, as the state party responsible for the site. In consequence, Taputapuatea is now listed as a “French” heritage site on UNESCO's website alongside such monuments as the Cathedral of Reims and the Palace of Versailles (UNESCO 2018), reinforcing France's colonial claim over the site rather than identifying it as a pan-Polynesian monument.

Meanwhile, the country's unresolved decolonization continued to be hotly debated within other UN agencies. During the annual hearings before the UN Decolonization Committee in New York at the beginning of October, the political status of French Polynesia was once again a subject of contention. President Fritch testified repeatedly that his country

was fulfilling all of the conditions of a self-governing country and should therefore be removed from the list of territories to be decolonized. However, since the country government actually only has administrative but no sovereign powers, which remain France's exclusive prerogatives, the president earned little recognition. Accordingly, the Overseas Territories Review blog stated that Fritch's statements were nothing more than "Colonial Accommodationist Antics" (OTR, 4 Oct 2017). The fifteen other representatives of French Polynesia who testified at the hearing all agreed and condemned their president and France's refusal to cooperate with the UN decolonization agencies (OTR, 4 Oct 2017; RNZ, 6 Oct 2017).

In late November, this assessment received additional confirmation when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Lausanne, Switzerland, responded to a request for subsidies to the local Olympic Committee of French Polynesia. The IOC stated that, unless French Polynesia becomes an independent state, its local committee would not be recognized by Lausanne, and the country could only participate in international sporting events through affiliation with France's IOC membership (*TI*, 30 Nov 2017).

Similarly, most international experts agree that the premature granting of full membership in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to French Polynesia and New Caledonia in 2016 has essentially given France two seats in the PIF, since foreign affairs is a French national prerogative, not one devolved to the country governments of either territory (Pareti 2017).

Any hopes that France's new

president, Emmanuel Macron, would finally bring a change in attitude from Paris were bitterly disappointed during the review period, as his administration's actions made it clear that there would be no turn in France's colonial policy.

Already Macron's predecessor François Hollande had disappointed many Polynesians, as he had promised in writing before his election to support the decolonization of the country and then did the exact opposite. Many hoped that Macron, who had labeled France's former colonial policy a "crime against humanity" during his election campaign, and who comes from a generation in which the decolonization of most other French overseas territories had already been completed before he was born, would make a turnaround in this regard (*Le Point*, 16 Feb 2017).

But in fact the Macron administration continued Hollande's scandalous disregard for international law as France was, for the fifth time in a row, reprimanded by the UN General Assembly for not transmitting information on French Polynesia to the UN Decolonization Committee. In stark contrast to New Caledonia, where France has been dutifully cooperating with the United Nations for years, French Polynesia continues to be the only one of the seventeen UN-recognized non-self-governing territories for which the administrative power is refusing to comply with article 71e of the UN charter by failing to forward information about the territory to the UN Decolonization Committee (United Nations 2017). Macron has thus turned out to be a hypocrite; under his leadership, France has

defended international legal instruments such as the Paris Agreement against the rogue attitude of Donald Trump's US administration, all while acting as a rogue state itself in regard to UN resolutions on decolonization.

Macron also continued the notorious tradition of interference in French Polynesia's domestic politics in favor of local pro-French forces when his party *En Marche* announced that it would officially support Édouard Fritch's party, *Tapura Huiraatira*, in the upcoming territorial elections (*Polynésie Première*, 23 Feb 2018).

This official endorsement from Paris only served to reinforce the appeal of *Tapura Huiraatira* to both voters worried about financial subsidies from France and local turncoat politicians looking to join whichever political party is in power. The party *Tahoeraa Huiraatira*—that of the doyen of local politics, eighty-seven-year-old former President Gaston Flosse—which had won a two-thirds majority of seats in the last elections in 2013, and from which *Tapura* had split off in 2015, was reduced to a small minority in the process. Already in June 2017, the Speaker of the Assembly Marcel Tuihani Jr and his father, former *Tahoeraa* party treasurer Marcel Tuihani Sr, resigned their *Tahoeraa* membership and became Independents due to differences with Flosse (*TI*, 6 June 2017). In September, *Tahoeraa* assembly member Gilda Vaiho-Faatoa followed in Tuihani's footsteps (*DT*, 4 Sept 2017). Just a few days later, Patricia Amaru and Juliette Nuupure also left *Tahoeraa* but, unlike the two Tuihanis mentioned above, went directly over to *Tapura* (*RNZ*, 13 Sept 2017). By the end of the term in

April 2018, *Tapura* held a supermajority of 33 out of 57 assembly seats, while Flosse's party retained only 12, with the rest consisting of 10 members for former president Oscar Temaru's pro-independence Union pour la Démocratie (UPLD, which had also earlier lost a member to *Tapura*) and the two Independents Vaiho-Faatoa and Tuihani Jr, who by then had formed a new political party, *Te Ora Api no Porinetia*.

In the run-up to the election, Temaru's pro-independence camp was further weakened, as UPLD, formed in 2004 as a larger umbrella organization including Temaru's *Tavini Huiraatira* and several smaller pro-independence or left-wing autonomist parties, fell apart. *Tauhiti Nena*, a former minister of sports, culture, and youth under Temaru who had already run under his own party label in his unsuccessful bid for a seat in the French National Assembly earlier in 2017, formed a new coalition of splinter groups, named *E Reo Manahune*, which included his own party *Tau Hoturau* and the local Green party *Heiura-Les Verts*, a former UPLD component. Another former UPLD member party, *Here Aia*, joined Gaston Flosse's *Tahoeraa*, and so did opportunistic former *Mahina* Mayor Emile Vernaudon (whose now defunct *Aia Api* party had also been a component of UPLD) and even two prominent veteran *Tavini* members, Myron Mataoa and Tamara Bopp-Dupont (*TI*, 9 April, 13 April 2018). This left *Tavini* to run as a single party, but at the same time the departure of opportunists and turncoats provided it with an opportunity to showcase its "moral purity"; the party pledged that none of

its candidates had ever been accused of political corruption and would immediately resign from politics if such a case should occur, whereas both Tahoeraa and Tapura included many candidates against whom corruption trials were pending, including President Fritch (*TI*, 17 Nov 2017). At the same time, Tavini modernized its political and economic platform, not advocating independence as a revolutionary rupture but rather as the eventual outcome of a sustained decolonization process in cooperation with France and UN agencies (Tavini Huiraaatira 2018).

On the other hand, Tahoeraa was certainly benefiting from the several defections from the pro-independence camp. Joined by several prominent labor union leaders, Flosse's new team gained the outlook of a party of nostalgics of an older political order—a party that feared Fritch's neoliberal reform program, much in line with that of Macron on the French national level. But Flosse's campaign was hampered by the fact that he himself was not allowed to run due to the conditions of a suspended prison sentence for corruption. In consequence, his longtime confidant Geffry Salmon acted as Tahoeraa's leading candidate instead, even though election posters still highlighted Flosse's face, counting on the veteran leader's unabated charisma. Additionally, Tahoeraa denounced the current French government as colonialist and advocated for a more substantial autonomy arrangement with France, presenting a draft bill to make French Polynesia into an "associated country" of France, somewhat similar to the Cook Islands' current relationship with New Zea-

land (Tahoeraa Huiraaatira 2018b), a project attracting significant interest of voters with anticolonial and Tahitian nationalist convictions and thus providing competition to Tavini.

But despite sustained campaigns by both opposition parties, the election results were unequivocal in confirming Fritch's political ascendancy. Already in the first round of voting on 22 April, Tapura stood clearly ahead with 43.04 percent of the vote. Tahoeraa scored second with 29.40 percent, while Tavini only won third place at 20.72 percent. Tuihani's Te Ora Api o Porinetia gained 3.68 percent, while Nena's E Reo Manahune scored merely 2 percent. Still further off with only 1.15 percent was another splinter group: "Dignité Bonheur" led by French settler Jérôme Gasior, a local offshoot of the populist French party Union Populaire Républicaine (*DT*, 23 April 2018).

In the runoff on 6 May, contested between those party lists that achieved at least 12.5 percent in the first round, Tapura won 49.18 percent, Tahoeraa 27.72 percent, and Tavini 23.11 percent. The outcome of the preliminary round was thus largely confirmed, with Tapura winning most of the first-round votes of the splinter parties and Tavini also showing some slight gains. Voter turnout reached a historic low with only 61.51 percent in the first round and 66.82 percent in the second round (*DT*, 7 May 2018).

While the percentages alone created a clear majority, the allocation of seats in the state assembly was even more massively in favor of Tapura, since the electoral law grants the leading party list an automatic bonus of one-third of the seats beyond the proportional

distribution of the remaining two-thirds of seats. Hence, Tapura received a two-thirds majority of 38 seats in the 57-seat assembly, while Tahoeraa got only 11 (down from 38 seats at the last election in 2013) and Tavini gained only 8 seats (11 in 2013).

On 17 May, the new assembly convened for its inaugural meeting, and Tapura member Gaston Tong Sang (another former president of the country) was elected Speaker. Two days later, the assembly confirmed Fritch as president with a majority of 39 votes, while Salmon received 10 votes and Temaru 8 votes; one of the Tahoeraa members had already defected to Fritch's camp. In his inaugural speech, Fritch expressed a conciliatory attitude toward the opposition and invited all assembly members to work together for the development of the country (*TI*, 17 May 2018).

Similar to the defection of Tong Sang from Tahoeraa in 2007 and his subsequent election victory in 2008, the 2018 election results mark a new cycle in the country's ever-evolving political landscape. Just like Tong Sang, Fritch has taken most of the convinced pro-French forces within Tahoeraa with him, leaving Flosse himself and his hard core to move once more in the direction of independence. Tapura's votes hence account for almost the entire French settler population (estimated at 10–15 percent of total inhabitants) and all those locals who are concerned about a stable and secure flow of subsidies from Paris. But it remains an open question whether Fritch's party, with such pure pragmatism and lacking a long-term vision, will have a future beyond the current term. Similarly, it

is questionable whether Tahoeraa will maintain itself beyond the life of the charismatic "old lion" Flosse.

Temaru's Tavini clearly also suffered a massive electoral decline, not only because of the collapse of UPLD and defections to Tahoeraa but also because many voters see Temaru's presidencies in the mid-2000s as a great disappointment, since nothing concrete was done at that time to prepare for independence. Nevertheless, Temaru and his advisors have learned from many of their past mistakes and were careful not to succumb, as they did in 2008, to Flosse's anticolonial rhetoric and to form a coalition with the "old lion." Flosse's proposal to form a common list of Tahoeraa and Tavini for the second round of the election, in order to be able to beat Fritch, was rejected by Tavini—an important step away from the tactics of power politics to moral integrity. As the only party with a clear long-term vision for the future, Tavini is clearly the party with the best chances of survival beyond the life of its founder.

Meanwhile, it cannot be denied that Fritch's prudent, pragmatic, and technocratic style of governance has yielded some positive economic results. Tourism, currently the only substantial industry in the private sector, has slowly picked up traction again as the number of visitors increased to 198,959 in 2017 (*TI*, 16 May 2018). But this is still less than at the height of the tourism boom in the 1990s and early 2000s, when there were far over 200,000 annual visitors (ISPF 2002).

Increasing tourism in order to stimulate economic growth and overcome dependency from French sub-

sidies is the main motivation behind “Mahana Beach,” Gaston Flosse’s pet project envisioned during his last term in office from 2013 to 2014; it entails building a large resort area in Punaauia on Tahiti’s northwest coast, which would consist of various hotels (some of them high-rise) and shopping and entertainment facilities, akin to Waikīkī on O’ahu, Hawai’i, or Tumon on Guam. While the Fritch administration continues to support the project, it has been less enthusiastic than Flosse, who kept promoting it on the title page of Tahoeraa’s electoral program. The project remains controversial because of its potential environmental impact, the massive injection of foreign (most likely Chinese) capital needed to build the facilities, and the planned exemption of the construction site from the minimum wage and other social benefits for workers in order to make it attractive for those investors (Rival 2017: 340–341).

The second controversial economic “megaproject”—significantly more advanced in its planning than Mahana Beach—is the fish farm that is being built, also with Chinese capital, on the atoll of Hao in the Tuamotus. Praised as a “blue economy” project that would provide a new type of income for the country besides French subsidies and tourism, the project is also controversial because of environmental concerns. First, the raising of thousands of fish in basins filled with millions of liters of water might entail massive impacts on the ecosystem of the atoll’s lagoon (Rival 2017: 339–340). Second, the site of the farm, a former support base for French nuclear weapons testing on other nearby atolls, is already significantly

polluted both chemically and radioactively, leading to concerns about the quality of the fish produced at the facility (*TPM*, 17 May 2018).

Reflecting on both megaprojects, French researcher Aurélie Bayen saw a pattern of French Polynesian elites searching for new sources of financial support for their unsustainable levels of consumption, analogous to a “cargo cult” (Bayen 2017), with Chinese investments having supplanted the French military-industrial complex and its “manne nucléaire” (nuclear manna) during the period of nuclear testing from the 1960s to the 1990s. Flosse’s new idea to finance the Mahana Beach project by an Arab billionaire from Abu Dhabi could be seen in that same logic (Tahoeraa Huiraaatira 2018a).

While the country is still figuring out how to develop a self-sufficient and sustainable economy, the future of the French colonial presence in the region is far from clear, as French policy often seems to lack well-articulated long-term objectives (Regnault 2017). At the same time, the inhabitants of the Marquesas Islands, who have never really felt comfortable being part of a Tahiti-centered political entity, are still searching for a meaningful status for their archipelago, either within or outside of the current political system (*TPM*, 20 April 2018). With the upcoming decolonization referendum in New Caledonia and its potential ramifications for Wallis and Futuna (MacLellan and Regan 2018: 1, 19), ripple effects toward the French-affiliated islands further east are not impossible in the near future.

During the review period, the country lost several leaders in the

political arena. On 29 August, former Papeete Mayor Louise Carlson (in office 1993–1995 and the only woman so far) passed away at age eighty-seven (TI, 30 Aug 2017). Another local politician, former Moorea Mayor Teriitepaiatua Maihi, died on 24 October aged only sixty-three (TI, 24 Oct 2017). On 20 February, seventy-six-year-old businessman, Catholic church administrator, and politician Emmanuel Porlier, who was also a former assembly member, passed away in Paris (TI, 20 Feb 2018). Two days later, former assembly member for the Tuamotus and government minister Moehau Teriitahi, one of the “turncoats” who had been part of virtually every assembly majority during the political instability of the mid-2000s, died aged sixty-seven (TI, 22 Feb 2018). On 6 April, leader of the labor union O Oe To Oe Rima and longtime assembly member Ronald Terorotua, another turncoat politician instrumental in making and unmaking majorities, also passed away prematurely at age sixty-three (TNTV, 7 April 2018).

In the cultural realm, three personalities passed away at rather young age, including popular radio and TV journalist, composer, and comedian Mario Brothers on 2 December at age fifty-five (TI, 2 Dec 2017) and Wilson Mahuta, a musician, authority on traditional percussion, and jury member of the annual Heiva competition, on 4 January, also aged fifty-five (TI, 4 Jan 2018). Writer Patrick Araia Amaru, a novelist and playwright in the Tahitian language, joined the ancestors on 18 June at the age of sixty (TNTV, 18 June 2018). In contrast, Taaria Walker, known as

“Mama Pare”—an elder and cultural authority of her home island of Rurutu, author of an autobiography (Walker 1999), and mother of Moanaura Walker (mentioned above)—lived to the age of eighty-seven at her passing on 2 February (TI, 2 Feb 2018).

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MĀORI ISSUES

The 2017 general election delivered twenty-nine members of Parliament of Māori descent, twenty of whom are in government, with eight of those becoming ministers. Māori also featured in sporting successes, especially women's rugby and men's softball. At the same time, racism against Māori became more blatant as decisions to allow Māori to have their own representation in local government were all successfully overturned. Māori continue to be disproportionately impacted by the effects of poverty in stark contrast to the Pākehā (European) population, which enjoys relative affluence. That drew criticism