

Reviews of American Samoa, the Cook Islands, Hawai'i, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna are not included in this issue.

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Recent developments in French Polynesia can be viewed through the prism of the forthcoming bumper election year in 2001 when, by coincidence, both the territorial and the municipal governments come up for renewal. Certainly the policies and machinations of both the incumbent government and the opposition parties were designed with this prospect in mind. The Tahoeraa government thus tried, but ultimately failed, to repeat its 1996 feat of pushing through yet another statutory reform redolent with nationalist symbolism. By contrast, the opposition united, and succeeded, in their aim of reforming the territory-wide electoral boundaries in favor of the urban constituency where their parties are strongest. Unprecedented, if anticipated, verdicts in the courts saw both President Flosse and former president Alexandre Léontieff convicted in separate cases of corruption. This means that possibly Flosse, and certainly Léontieff (who now sides with the *indépendentiste* opposition) will not be eligible to stand as candidates in 2001. Down but not out, the government pursued opulence-oriented initiatives including the inauguration of palatial offices for the presidency, an entertainment complex, and a territorial television station. The econ-

omy also worked to the government's advantage, putting in a solid performance.

French Polynesia was progressing steadily toward the new political status of overseas country (*pays d'outre mer*¹) in the latter half of 1999. The draft constitutional law project was adopted by the French national assembly on 10 June and later by the senate on 12 October. Notwithstanding the concerted efforts of Deputy-Mayor Michel Buillard and Senator-President Gaston Flosse, France rejected numerous proposals by the territorial assembly to increase French Polynesia's powers under the new status. Most important (and unlike the agreement reached by New Caledonia) the transfer of specific powers to French Polynesia as a *pays d'outre mer* would not be definitive; in other words, it could be reversed at a later date. Nor did the French Polynesian assembly realize its ambition to have its legislation accountable only to the French constitutional council. French Polynesia also sought a major expansion of its powers to negotiate international accords, including the a priori right to sign such agreements. This claim too was rejected, as was the quest to call the "country" Tahiti Nui (TP, July 1999, 28–29; Nov 1999, 26–27).

Despite the limitations of the *pays d'outre mer* status, Flosse pronounced himself satisfied with the final version of the constitutional amendment, which had retained his much-vaunted

conception of Polynesian citizenship. (The enthusiasm for citizenship was not shared by the opposition, which considered it meaningless without restrictions on the right to vote as applied in the New Caledonia reforms.) Flosse was very keen to push through the constitutional change prior to the 2001 elections, as he believed new statutory gains would provide a welcome boost to his party's electoral campaign. It was a major disappointment for the president and his government when the process of instituting the new status stalled at the final stage of its approval. Such changes to the French constitution require the approval of a joint sitting by the two houses of parliament, known as a Congress of Versailles. The session was planned for 24 January but was canceled indefinitely because the opposition had signaled it would not approve an important constitutional amendment relating to reform of the French legal system that was scheduled for the same day. Although the *pays d'outre mer* amendment had received bipartisan support, the government was loath to organize a joint sitting solely to consider it. French Polynesia's quest to be a "country" was postponed to an undetermined future date (*TP*, January 2000, 32–33).

As flagged in the previous review (von Strokirch 2000), the embittered Deputy-Mayor Emile Vernaudon continued his crusade to bring down the government of Flosse and his Tahoe-*raa* party by whatever means necessary. A centerpiece of his strategy was to pursue electoral reforms that would benefit the urban-based opposition parties and severely disadvantage the governing Tahoe-*raa* party, which

relies heavily on votes from the outer islands. To illustrate the disparities under the current electoral law, last modified in 1985, the largely urban Windward Islands (Tahiti and Moo-*rea*), which account for 74 percent of the population, are allocated only 54 percent, or 22 of the 41 seats, in the territorial assembly. Conversely, the outer islands are allocated 46 percent of the seats for only 26 percent of the population. In practice, a candidate from the Windward Islands needs an average of 4,139 votes to be elected, whereas their counterparts in the Lee-ward Islands require 2,163 votes, and in the Australs only 1,428 votes (CESC report 114, 27 April 2000). On the grounds that demographic trends have rendered the existing electoral distribution highly inequitable, Vernaudon argued that reform was well overdue.

Vernaudon's first proposal for electoral reform was tabled in the French national assembly on 9 March 1999 and advocated the transfer of 7 of the 41 territorial assembly seats from the outer islands to the Windward Islands. Flosse was adamantly opposed, so much so that he warned Minister for Overseas France (DOM-TOM) Jean Jacques Queyranne that if the French state "touches a single seat in the outer islands Tahoe-*raa* will boycott the next elections" (*TP*, August 1999, 7). Rhetoric aside, Flosse recognized that the current inequities were indefensible and produced a counter proposal to give the Windward Islands an additional 4 seats and increase the overall size of the territorial assembly to 45 seats. On 23 November 1999 he presented this draft law to the French Senate, which approved it but increased the additional seats for the Windwards to 6 for a total of 47.

However, it transpired that Flosse's draft law included other elements that would render it unconstitutional. This led to Tahoeraa Party Deputy Michel Buillard putting forward yet another version of electoral reform to the national assembly on 24 May 2000. The Buillard draft law (jointly sponsored by former DOM-TOM minister Dominique Perben) envisaged an additional 8 seats for the Windward Islands, increasing the assembly to 49 seats. The proposals by Flosse and Buillard were concessions designed to reduce the glaring inequities in representation between the Windward Islands and the outer islands and still strongly favor the latter.

Before the question of the number and distribution of seats had been resolved, Vernaudon placed another iron in the fire with a proposal to the national assembly on 6 April 2000 to create a single electoral district in French Polynesia instead of the existing five divisions among the archipelagos. Highlighting once again the inequities of the existing system, he argued that the democratic principle of one person one vote should be applied in keeping with the spirit of the French constitution. In effect, Vernaudon's reform would render the Tahoeraa party's support base in the outer islands virtually irrelevant in territorial elections. Flosse was incensed, not only by Vernaudon's latest gambit, but even more by the fact that the leader of the French socialist party, François Hollande, openly supported what Flosse portrayed as a blatant attempt to overthrow his government and drive French Polynesia to independence. A French socialist party deputy, François Merle, observed wryly that "In reality, what Mr Flosse

cannot tolerate is that the absolute power he has organized by clientelism and by an electoral system that keeps him in power in conditions of unjust representation could be called into question" (TP, May 2000, 7-10).

A complete bipolarization of territorial politics ensued on the specific issue of electoral reform. This was not surprising as the stakes were high, with the outcome likely to determine whether the government or the opposition would win the 2001 territorial elections. In March Vernaudon's Ai'a Api joined forces with the pro-independence parties, Oscar Temaru's Tavini and Jacqui Drollet's Ia Mana, to fight for their preferred version of electoral reform. To this effect, on 15 March they issued a joint memorandum, in which they argued that the size of the assembly should not be increased as it would place an unnecessary burden on the budget. They also made known the intention of the "progressive Polynesian parties" to mount a joint list for the territorial elections under the leadership of Temaru. Vernaudon thus officially abandoned his long-standing position as an autonomist and pronounced himself a *souverainiste* (a slight semantic distinction from the usual *indépendantiste*). Compared to earlier Tavini policies the memorandum exhibited a marked change in tone, whereby it emphasized that independence would by no means signify a rupture in relations with France. They expressed the hope that there would continue to be cooperation via treaties between equals in domains such as the economy, currency, education, and defense. They fully expected France to continue current levels of financial assistance in a postindependence con-

text as a form of compensation for the economic distortions caused by thirty years of nuclear testing. The three parties expressed their appreciation for discussions they had entered into with the metropolitan socialist party on these matters since June 1999.

In the face of the perceived conspiracy between the united territorial opposition and the metropolitan socialists, Flosse summoned all available forces in April and May to defeat Vernaudon's proposed single electoral division. First he gained the support of municipal governments with no less than 37 of the 48 territorial mayors rallying in opposition to the Vernaudon reform. This was an impressive feat as it demonstrated how successful the Tahoeraa government has been in recent years with its policy of winning allegiance from mayors via a selective scheme of subsidies to the municipalities. The government then gained the support of an important territorial institution, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (CESC), which officially advises the government and parliament. The council severely criticized the proposal for a single electoral division on the grounds that it would disadvantage the outer islands, which already experience isolation and neglect (CESC report 114, 27 April 2000). It later expressed itself in favor of the Buillard electoral reform. Predictably, the territorial assembly (which acts as a rubber stamp for any policies put before it by the government) also rejected the Vernaudon reform. Finally, and importantly, given his role as the sole independent voice in territorial politics, Mayor-Assemblyman Boris Léontieff backed the government's electoral reform due to his concern to maintain representa-

tion for the outer islands. This was an interesting development as his Fetia Api party's electoral prospects would have improved significantly under a single electorate.

There was an intense period of activity from March through to late June as the two sides repeatedly sent delegations of their leading lights to Paris to lobby metropolitan political parties and the national government for their respective electoral reform projects. Ultimately the socialist government and its majority in the national assembly opted for an electoral reform falling somewhere between the two preferences. Vernaudon's first proposal, to maintain the size of the assembly at 41 seats while augmenting the share of the Windward Islands from 22 to 29 seats, was passed by the national assembly on 22 June. The Windward Islands would henceforth receive 71 percent of the seats in close proportion with its 74 percent share of the population. Specifically the outer island seats would be reduced as follows: Leewards 8 to 5; Marquesas 3 to 2; Australs 3 to 2; Tuamotu-Gambier 5 to 3. The draft organic law must still go back to the opposition-dominated senate in the October 2000 session. Nevertheless, in the event of differences, its fate will finally be decided by a mixed commission from the senate and the assembly, which usually comes down in favor of the assembly. The French government has also given notice that it intends to push through the reform as a matter of urgency so that it will apply to the 2001 elections in French Polynesia. Vernaudon's second proposal for a single electoral division, however, was definitively rejected. DOM-TOM Minister Queyranne

explained that such a change would risk depriving the outer islands of representation, as their interests would become marginal for urban-based political parties. He also noted that the proposal had not obtained widespread popular support in French Polynesia (*NT*, 23 June 2000, 4).

In contrast to the subject of electoral distribution, territorial parties found themselves united in opposition to the strict application of a metropolitan electoral law on gender parity. On 8 July 1999 the French constitution was modified to enable a French electoral law that will ensure an equal number of men and women are presented as candidates on the electoral lists of political parties. In the national assembly's first discussion of an organic law to apply the new principle of parity, Vernaudon was successful in arguing for an amendment exempting the overseas territories so that, although their lists would include an equal number of men and women, they would not be obliged to have a strict alternation of candidates by gender. Later, Flosse persuaded the senate to support the same amendment. There was bipartisan consensus in the territory that, on the grounds of cultural particularity, their society was not ready for the more radical interpretation of parity. The law commission of the national assembly was not in agreement with this territorial perspective and deemed it imperative that national electoral laws be applied without exception throughout the republic. The matter was thus brought back to the national assembly on 21 June and passed without the Vernaudon amendment. The new parity law will thus apply to the 2001 territorial elections (*NT*, 22 June 2000, 3).

The parity law promises to hold major ramifications for territorial politics, given that currently only 5 out of the 41 territorial representatives are women. It poses a challenge to political parties, not only to find female candidates willing and able to stand, but also the vexed issue of which men will assume a lower position on the party list or bow out altogether. By way of illustration, consider the factional deals made by the Tavini party in recent years to co-opt leaders of other opposition parties to their cause. Jacqui Drollet and Alexandre Léontieff, both leaders of near defunct parties, joined the Tavini electoral alliance in 1996 because they were placed high enough on the list to win. Another convert, Jean-Marius Raapoto, unsuccessfully ran as Tavini's senate candidate in 1998 and no doubt believes he has earned a seat in the next territorial assembly. Similarly, Emile Vernaudon will expect a safe spot on the list if he goes ahead with his stated intention to campaign with Tavini in 2001. In addition to Temaru himself, how can these men and other leading lights in the party all realize their political ambitions if their names must alternate with those of relatively unknown female candidates? If any one of them is not assured a seat in the assembly they could well decide to abandon the joint list, taking their loyal voters with them. Such scenarios may explain why political leaders were so hostile to the institution of parity.

In March another piece of French legislation was passed with implications for the territory, but this time specific circumstances were taken into account as a result of determined lobbying by Flosse. The legislation concerned the limit to be placed on the

accumulation of political offices by individuals. In view of his own accumulation of the offices of national senator, territorial president, and mayor of Piraë, Flosse had pronounced himself in favor of the general principle but envisaged special exemptions for French Polynesia. Not surprisingly, one exemption would allow him to retain his senatorial and presidential positions concurrently. Thus the ordinary law limiting the accumulation of mandates was passed by the national assembly on 8 March, allowing national parliamentarians to concurrently hold no more than one of the following offices: president of a general council (the assemblies of French departments), mayor, or president of French Polynesia. A separate organic law pushed through the senate by Flosse made further allowances for the territory. This departure from the new metropolitan law gave the right for a territorial minister to also be a mayor, regardless of the size of their municipality (*DT*, 9 March 2000, 19). The validity of the organic law was confirmed on 30 March by the French constitutional council. This decision was cause for relief on both sides of politics, as the notion of mayors being unable to act as ministers would have been viewed as pure heresy.

In practice the limit on mandates meant that Flosse was obliged to give up one of his three offices, and he resigned from the least important one of mayor on 10 March, albeit with some sentimental regret. Piraë was the launching pad for his career in politics after he won the municipal elections in 1963 and he has held the office of mayor with comfortable majorities ever since. Unwilling to let

his beloved Piraë leave the family fold, Flosse effected an orderly dynastic succession for his son-in-law, Edouard Fritch, who is also deputy leader of Tahoëraa and a government minister. The process began with a by-election on 9 April to replace four deceased municipal councillors. Due to the short notice, and also the awareness that their chances were slim in this staunchly pro-Flosse electorate, the territorial opposition declined to field candidates. Tahoëraa's four chosen women candidates were elected unopposed, and the reconstituted council elected Fritch as mayor of Piraë on 13 April. Fritch thus has a year in which to make a positive impression on the electorate before they judge him at the ballot box. As a result of Flosse's enthusiasm for architectural legacies, Fritch also inherited a project to construct a fabulous new town hall at a cost of FCFP800 million. The cost of construction is being split roughly three ways between the municipality, the territory, and the French state (Jean-Marie Frebault, premier adjoint, Piraë).

Unfortunately for Gaston Flosse, all these efforts to sustain his political empire could come to nought if the convictions against him for corruption are confirmed by appeals to the highest courts in Paris. In October a trial began, eight years after the so-called Hombo affair in which Flosse and his colleagues turned a blind eye to the operation of an illegal casino in return for an estimated FCFP30 million donation to the Tahoëraa party's coffers. The judgment on 24 November convicted Flosse (and others) of passive corruption and complicity in allowing an illegal gambling house. The president received a two-year sus-

pended prison sentence, an FCFP1.8 million fine, and, significantly, one year of ineligibility for public office. Despite calls by the opposition for him to resign immediately, Flosse refused and signaled his intention to stay in office until the appeal process was concluded. As the appeal could take up to two years, this may allow Flosse to campaign on behalf of Tahoeraa for the 2001 elections before his fate is decided. Flosse's participation could be crucial if Tahoeraa is to hold any hope of staying in government once the electoral system is adjusted to a more level playing field. The party faithful stood by Flosse, giving him a hero's welcome when he returned to Tahiti from the trial and reelected him president of the party in their annual congress in December (*TP*, Nov 1999, 10–11; Dec 1999, 10).

In another trial in February, Flosse was convicted for having accepted thirteen free flights with the Oceania airline in return for making that company the government's exclusive carrier for official business. His penalty was an eight-month suspended prison sentence, FCFP2.73 million fine, but no removal of civic rights. In effect, he would be left with a clean record after paying the fine, and for that reason Flosse and his lawyer considered the verdict a good outcome and did not seek appeal (*TP*, Feb 2000, 7–8). In yet another court case concerning Flosse, but one in which he was not personally charged, his highest-level staff were convicted in November for having stolen files from the office of an opposition lawyer. The three convicted men remain in the employ of the presidency.

The wheels of justice turn slowly because of a law that requires the tri-

als of territorial politicians to be relocated to metropolitan France. Nevertheless, the law finally caught up with former president Alexandre Léontieff. In the year under review his convictions were confirmed in three separate court cases. In the first instance, Léontieff's right to appeal his conviction in the Cardela Clinic affair was rejected, and his one-year prison sentence was confirmed for taking a bribe in return for writing off the clinic's tax bill. Léontieff thus assumed the dubious distinction of being the first territorial politician imprisoned since the late 1950s. He began serving time in September. In the second case, Léontieff's conviction was confirmed in the appeals court for receiving a \$1 million commission from a Japanese developer in return for approving the construction of a hotel and golf course in Moorea. He received another three-year prison sentence (one year suspended). In a similar case, the appeals court confirmed Léontieff's conviction for the Meridien Hotel affair with another three-year prison sentence (two years suspended). All the penalties included weighty fines and privation of civic rights (*TP*, Oct 1999, 7, 13; April 2000, 13). Léontieff must have a very good lawyer, for by May he had already been released from prison under special conditions, and he resumed working as a strategist for the Tavini opposition.

President Flosse has clearly taken to heart the dictum of circus for the masses if the events of late June are anything to go by. Flosse officially opened a new entertainment venue (27 June), opened his new presidential offices to the public (28 June), inaugurated the territory's own television station, and celebrated autonomy day

on 29 June. The date chosen by Flosse for autonomy day is scorned by the opposition as it marks Tahiti's annexation by France in 1880 and bears no relation to milestones in the territory's evolving status of autonomy. The opposition also hounded the president over the cost of his new presidential *palais*. It was initially budgeted at FCFPI billion, but was completed two years late, and the final cost of construction blew out to 3.5 billion (of which the state paid 600 million), although the opposition believes its real cost to be much higher (Assembly debate, 8 June 2000). It is an ornate European-style building, similar to the existing Pape'ete and forthcoming Pirae town halls, and much of the interior was decorated by master craftsmen brought in from France. Flosse's *demi* origins lean toward his French side in architectural taste and other aesthetic choices, such as the new mock-gas streetlights on the waterfront mimicking those on the Champs Élysées in Paris.

As with most developments of any publicity value, the president was personally involved in the construction of the new outdoor entertainment venue, which was built in record time by his Polynesian Intervention Group. The To'ata place, on the Pape'ete seafront, was consecrated with a fabulous traditional ceremony with over a thousand performing artists participating, but the official opening gesture fell to a barefoot President Flosse. To'ata will be the venue for the annual cultural festival. In an interesting shift, this festival, long known as the *Tiurai*, then in recent years as the *Heiva*, now appears to be undergoing another name change—this year the press referred to it as Tahiti Nui 2000

(*DT* and *NT*, 27 and 28 June 2000). Tahiti Nui is the president's preferred name for the territory as a whole, though not one officially recognized by France. Nevertheless, he has proceeded to stamp this name on all new entities, including the airline, Tahiti Nui Satellite service, and Tahiti Nui Television (TNTV), both of which were launched symbolically on autonomy day.

In view of the official energy and taxpayers' funds devoted to setting up Tahiti Nui Television, analysis is warranted to discern the political motivations behind it. The president has become increasingly intolerant of criticism from any quarters, including the media. Flosse finds no fault in the coverage of the two daily newspapers which are owned by the right-wing media magnate Hersant. However, the monthly *Tahiti Pacifique* has been a constant source of irritation, as has Radio Tefana, run by the Tavini opposition. Although the television satellite station *Canal Polynésie* has been favorable to the government, no doubt because it has benefitted from generous subsidies, the same cannot be said for other stations. Telefenua mainly shows programs from abroad, but the small percentage of its airtime given to local current affairs has proven unacceptable to the president, who charged it with being *indépendantiste*. Members of the government are forbidden to appear on the station, and the government mounted an unsuccessful legal challenge to take Telefenua off the air. The two French state television stations and their counterparts in radio (RFO) have become more balanced in their reporting of current affairs since they were admonished by the court for being biased in favor of

the government during the last election campaign. RFO's newfound neutrality has angered the president, who accused them of trying to "massacre our majority" (*TP*, Feb 2000, 24-26). The ostensible objective of Tahiti Nui Television is to promote Tahitian culture and indigenous programs, while the other stations show mainly imported programs; however the context just described suggests other factors were at play in the government's decision.

The speed with which Tahiti Nui Television was set up was nothing short of remarkable. The territorial assembly voted to create the quasi-public enterprise on 17 March 2000. Its initial starting capital was FCFP550 million, of which the government contributed 85 percent, with the balance made up by private shareholders. It is anticipated that the station could break even financially by the year 2005, but only if it realizes its ambition of FCFP500 million per year from advertising revenue—a tall order given that this figure is only slightly less than what RFO currently earns from advertising (*NT*, 21 June 2000, 4-5). Although creating a territorial television station is within the government's powers, it was obliged to obtain approval from the metropolitan audiovisual council (*Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel* or CSA). The council believed there were inadequate guarantees that pluralism would be respected by Tahiti Nui Television, and its approval was withheld until such guarantees could be made. Evidently the council was concerned at the widely shared public perception that Tahiti Nui Television was too closely identified with the government and its president. The audiovisual

council demanded less government involvement in the board of Tahiti Nui Television (that is, no ministers), more openness about its shareholders to prevent conflicts of interest, a minimum local content of two hours a day, and clarifications about the amount and duration of public funding for the station (*NT*, 15 June 2000, 3). These conditions were subsequently agreed to by Tahiti Nui Television in a convention with the audiovisual council, and the station received its permit to go to air just a week before the much-publicized opening at the end of June. Just in case three local stations and two satellite television stations were not enough for a territory of 225,000 people, the government also launched Tahiti Nui Satellite, a territory-wide diffusion of another dozen satellite television channels and Internet access. This subsidized competition is likely to ruin the privately run Telefenua.

The fortunes of the new territorial airline, Air Tahiti Nui, have been mixed to date. There have been repeated increases in the government's contribution to the capital of the airline, including allocations from the president's own special funds to tide it over financial difficulties.

Originally the assembly had voted to limit government participation to 10 percent, but later it removed this restriction, and by March 2000 total public participation via various government agencies exceeded 50 percent and totaled FCFP1.6 billion. In 1999 the company succeeded in filling an average of 52 percent of seats on its Los Angeles route and 62 percent on its Tokyo route. (A new route is planned for Osaka.) It also undertook numerous charter flights throughout the Pacific Islands that were largely

subsidized by the territory. Notably, 12 percent of passengers on the Los Angeles route did not pay for their tickets. Overall, in 1999 Air Tahiti Nui lost FCFP 1.2 billion, which was 400 million greater than initial predictions (*TP*, April 2000, 9).

Tahiti Nui Television and Air Tahiti Nui are just the latest additions in a long list of quasi-public enterprises (*sociétés d'économie mixtes*) in which the territorial government is often the majority shareholder. Others include SEP rubbish disposal, TEP energy, SETIL airports and construction, the president's versatile band of workers on special projects—the Polynesian Intervention Group, the Internet operation Project METU@, and the commercialization of various activities by the post and telecommunications office and the housing office. Many of these initiatives have been made possible with the post-CEP development funds provided by France to transform the territorial economy. The quasi-public enterprises have contributed to economic growth, the provision of employment, and, in some cases, to the improvement of essential services. Yet the trend for the government's increasing involvement in these enterprises does pose cause for concern. They are set up with public monies, but in many instances there is no guarantee they will ever break even, much less make a profit. Subsidizing their operations is likely to constitute a continuing drain on territorial revenue. Another problem is that the position of president of such a company is often used as a payoff to politicians loyal to the incumbent government, so the president may not be chosen on the grounds of merit. In addition to their lucrative salaries,

several politicians heading quasi-public enterprises have engaged in corruption.

Nevertheless, the short to medium term economic outlook is rosy for the government. The pearl-culture sector has continued its impressive performance and accounts for more than half the territory's total exports. In 1988 French Polynesia exported only 440 kilograms of black pearls, but by 1999 it had reached a new record of over 8,000 kilograms in exports (a 40 percent increase over the previous year) at an estimated value of FCFP 22 billion. Tahitian black pearls now account for over 30 percent of the world market (*DIXIT* 2000, 210). Apart from the improved quality and quantity of local production, the remarkable increase in market share can be attributed to a plague wiping out a large part of the Japanese pearl industry since the mid-1990s. The tourism sector also continued its steady growth, finally attaining the magical figure of 200,000 tourists in 1999, which was nevertheless short of the government's ambitious predictions.

A report by the Bank of Hawaii indicated several positive trends in the economy (Osman 1999). It noted that French Polynesia has developed an advanced physical, social, and financial infrastructure that is second to none compared to its Pacific Island neighbors. After a slump in 1995 and 1996 associated with the nuclear test resumption, French Polynesia's economy recovered strongly from 1997 to 1999, mainly due to a construction boom relating to public works and hotels on Tahiti. This growth in turn was largely funded by transfers from the French state, including FCFP 18

billion per year to promote a conversion of the economy in the post-nuclear-test era. Given that this extraordinary development assistance from the state is scheduled to conclude in 2005, the government will have to find other sources of revenue or reduce its programs. For the time being, economic growth is set to continue and will stand the Tahoeraa party in good stead for its electoral campaign.

It is still too early to make firm predictions about the 2001 territorial elections, but preliminary analysis and speculation are in order. The fact that the government did not achieve the status of overseas country for French Polynesia may not be very significant in electoral terms. The public is noticeably weary of repeated reforms to the statute, which have often been bigger on symbolism than substance. Of far greater import is the French government's preparedness to adjust electoral boundaries in favor of Tahiti and thereby advantage the urban-based opposition parties. The new-found unity of the opposition also warrants attention in this context. All the opposition's leading lights, with the exception of Boris Léontieff, have now come together in a pro-independence coalition dominated by Tavini. As a result of the moderating influence of these new members (notably Alexandre Léontieff, who is a key party strategist) Tavini's platform has shifted to the center ground. The party has abandoned its antagonistic stance toward France and envisages a long-term relationship of cooperation, even after the territory accedes to independence. The erstwhile threat of a rupture of ties, and therefore economic

sacrifice, has been removed. New Caledonia's chosen path also suggests the scope for a gradual transition to independence. The socialist party in Paris appears receptive to such moves by French Polynesia and has entered into dialogue with the territorial opposition. For all these reasons Tavini has acquired greater mainstream credibility as an alternative government. In contrast to every territorial election held since 1982, the Tahoeraa party is acutely aware that the outcome of the next poll is by no means a foregone conclusion.

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I GRATEFULLY *acknowledge Semir Al-Wardi's insights on current political developments.*

Note

1 For a detailed analysis of *pays d'outre mer* status see von Strokirch 2000.

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