5. French Polynesia: Autonomy or independence?

With the cessation of nuclear testing in 1996, and the French commitment to the 20-year Noumea Accord process in New Caledonia underpinned by massive investment in developing nickel at a time of rising global, especially Chinese, demand, New Caledonia displaced French Polynesia as France’s primary strategic asset in the South Pacific. There was accordingly less attention paid by Paris to responding to demands from French Polynesia, leading to instability and hasty measures to address resultant problems.

In this period, from the end of the 1990s, as in New Caledonia, French Polynesian politics have also been characterised by the fragmentation of principal parties, loyalist and pro-independence alike, and surprising alliances, but, unlike New Caledonia after 1999, this has taken place against a background of constant statutory change without broad consultation. Local corruption and overt French intervention have been characteristic of French Polynesian politics in the last decade.

Elections in 1996 saw the return of Gaston Flosse’s Tahoeraa Huira’atira (People’s Assembly) but also an increase in support for Oscar Temaru’s pro-independence Tavini Huira’atira no Te Ao Maohi (Serviteur du Peuple or Polynesian People’s Servant). Flosse closely followed developments in New Caledonia, especially its Organic Law of 1999 giving it special status (where it was assigned sui generis status and referred to as a ‘pays’, or country). He sought similar provisions for French Polynesia. While he did not claim a self-determination referendum or restricted electorate, as applied to New Caledonia, he did seek legislative powers and special citizenship provisions linked with protecting local labor and property rights. Despite the difficulties of cohabitation (the coexistence of a presidency of one complexion and a government led by a prime minister of another) conservative President Jacques Chirac and socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin endorsed Flosse’s proposals, as did a constitutional review. The final step, however, adoption by a joint sitting of the French assembly and senate in a Versailles Congress, was frustrated by linking the measure with a separate and unrelated amendment on the independence of France’s Superior Magistrature, which was judged in the end unlikely to attract support and was thus withdrawn, the same provision that held up the restrained electorate amendment for New Caledonia (see Chapter 4). As indicated, this reflected the familiar old pattern of other domestic metropolitan priorities dictating policy change in the South Pacific entities.
After Flosse’s Tahoeraa won local elections in 2001, and Chirac was re-elected as president in 2002, a renewed constitutional review process judged, in March 2003, that the proposals could not go as far as Flosse had sought. French Polynesia would have to remain as an overseas ‘collectivity’ (not ‘country’ like New Caledonia, as proposed), albeit a collectivity with considerable autonomy. It would also not take on legislative powers of its own, as the New Caledonian government had done. Without the full support of the local assembly, the resulting Organic Law of February 2004 (Law No 2004-193 of 27 February 2004) was passed by the French national assembly. While not delivering everything Flosse had sought, it was a monument to Flosse and his majority, pro-autonomy within France, party. It strengthened the presidency (Flosse was to be titled President of French Polynesia) and included a measure allocating a bonus of one third of the seats, in each electorate, for the winning party, presumed to be Flosse’s Tahoeraa, in local elections. But in subsequent elections in May 2004, the provision backfired. Despite winning eight per cent more votes in the collectivity as a whole, Tahoeraa was defeated by just 400 votes in the most populous electorate, the Iles du Vent (Windward Island), in Papeete and Faaa. Thus the bonus 13 seats went to Temaru’s Tavini-led coalition Union pour la Démocratie (UPLD, Union for Democracy). Of the 57-seat assembly, UPLD won 26 seats, anti-Flosse autonomist parties a further three, and Flosse’s Tahoeraa 28. Temaru’s alliances, and winning over one Tahoeraa member, enabled him to take government with 30 votes. Aside from the procedural aspects, the election of and support for Temaru reflected increasing dissatisfaction with Flosse’s personal style and government of patronage. The phenomena of change was called the ‘taui’.

Pro-independence ascendance

For the first time, the government was led by avowedly pro-independence parties. At the time, Temaru was measured and conciliatory, announcing that the goal of independence was a long-term one, to be achieved perhaps over 15 to 20 years (see Chappell 2005b, Regnault 2005a, 43). He spoke about shared sovereignty along the lines of the Cook Islands/New Zealand model (Mrgudovic 2008, 360, Nichols 2007). For some years, he was relatively silent on the concept of independence in the domestic arena, as opposed to regionally. In June 2009, in stocktaking discussions with French officials as part of a French program of consultations after the violent May 2009 protests in Guadeloupe, Temaru made a distinction between ‘sovereignty’ and ‘independence’, expressing his support for sovereignty for French Polynesia while noting that independence would not mean a ‘full break’ (Radio New Zealand 17 June 2009).
Immediately after his election Temaru also made no reference to his earlier reiteration, since 1990, of a demand for the United Nations (UN) Decolonisation Committee to re-inscribe French Polynesia as a non-self-governing territory. But, by the end of 2004, with his leadership frustrated by the efforts of the pro-France group, Temaru raised the question of independence in regional forums, with a predictable French response (see Regional Issues below). And, again, reflecting his frustration after years of leadership challenges, by 2011 he secured a resolution by the French Polynesian assembly to call for reinscription with the UN.

On Temaru’s surprise election, there began an ongoing game of musical chairs, with various members and elements of the coalition switching sides in votes of no-confidence in successive presidents. Flosse thus regained the presidency in October 2004. But, in a move that looked like French collusion with Flosse, the French Council of State annulled the 2004 election in the Windward Islands electorate a month later, requiring a re-run. At the same time, in a move reminiscent of France’s resistance to Vanuatu’s independence (see Chapter 2) Minister for Overseas France, Brigitte Girardin, threatened to turn off the economic aid tap if Temaru won the election (Chappell 2005b, 199). Again France’s efforts backfired: a re-run election delivered a slightly increased vote to Temaru, this time he won by 600 rather than 400 votes, leading to his reinstatement as president in March 2005 (29 seats to 26). Destabilising activity by Flosse (backed by his French supporters) continued. By the following year, the UPLD majority lost the presidency of the assembly in April 2006 but regained it the same month, only to lose it again in December 2006. This time, aware of mounting feeling against Flosse personally, the Tahoeraa did not put forward Flosse as president, but, rather, one of his supporters, Gaston Tong Sang.

The French Government, dismayed by the chronic instability inherent in French Polynesia, and no doubt the loss of support for the pro-France faction — seemingly as a result of its 2004 electoral changes — sought to stabilise the situation with two pieces of legislation, provisions in an Organic Law for Overseas France in February 2007 (Organic Law No 2007-223 of 21 February 2007) with the effect, for French Polynesia, of abolishing the one-third bonus for the majority in each electorate, and a revision of French Polynesia’s 2004 Organic Law in December 2007 (Law No 2007-1720 of 7 December 2007) which Paris again pushed through the national assembly, despite the local assembly’s vote against it (in 44 of 57 votes). To limit the proliferation of new parties, the new law provided for proportional voting in two rounds, with only those receiving a minimum of 12.5 per cent of the vote in the first round proceeding to the second. To curb the constant change of presidents and speakers, the president could henceforth only be replaced by a motion, which included the simultaneous election of a successor; and the speaker could only be elected once
for a full five-year term. Various parties in the assembly, including the Tahoeera and UPLD, were united in their opposition to the legislation, which they saw as France tampering with local issues (*Flash d’Océanie* 11 October 2008). As succinctly described by Lorenz Gonschor,

> This episode proved once more that the statute of autonomy does not guarantee real local self-government, as France remains able to make arbitrary modifications to its political system against the explicit will of the local assembly (Gonschor 2009, 154).

As in New Caledonia, French efforts to rally the pro-France parties backfired by inadvertently promoting a coalescence of interests between the local parties around their own French Polynesian interests. Partly, too, developments were influenced by Sarkozy’s election as President in May 2007, meaning that Flosse had lost the close political support in Paris of his friend Jacques Chirac. But then Flosse’s supporters became disenchanted with Tong Sang when they were left out of a delegation visiting Paris in mid 2007 (see Gonschor 2009 p. 152). Tong Sang’s government also proved to be short-lived, to be replaced in August 2007 by the unlikely coalition of Flosse and Temaru, with Temaru as president. Flosse’s chameleon politics operated once more, as they had when he changed from pro-France advocate to pro-autonomy champion in the 1980s. By agreeing to share power with his former archenemy, pro-independence Temaru, he was preserving his own position and role, but also working to represent local interests.

Regnault, in 2005, noted the increasing similarities between the Flosse and Temaru camps, their shared view of an evolving autonomy along the New Caledonian model, a desire to distance French Polynesia from links with the metropolitan power, but with a strong awareness of the need for cooperation for development and aid (Regnault 2005a, 38). As Flosse lost personal support and Temaru gained experience in government, their objectives merged sufficiently to allow for an alliance that was convenient to both. Nonetheless, some of Flosse’s supporters deserted to Tong Sang at this time (Gonschor 2009, 152).

In February 2008 elections, Tong Sang became president. He had formed a new party, O Porinetia to Tatou Ai’a (Polynesia is our country), leading an alliance called the To Tatou Ai’a (Our Land) with Tahoeraa dissidents including Jean-Christophe Bouissou’s Rautahi (Unity) party; former Temaru ally Emile Vernaudon’s Ai’a Api (New Homeland); the former centrist Fetia Api (New Star of Philip Schyle); and some small pro-France parties. Tong Sang’s alliance won 27 of the 57 seats, Temaru’s UPLD 20, and Flosse’s Tahoeraa 10. This suited the French State, which had envisaged a coalition of pro-autonomy Tong Sang–Flosse supporters (as opposed to pro-independence supporters). Indeed, Secretary of State for Overseas France, Christian Estrosi, had visited the collectivity during
the months before the election, showing support for Tong Sang and reportedly telephoning Flosse and another party leader Nicole Bouteau, in between rounds, to urge them to join with Tong Sang (Gonschor 2009, 155); and again after the second round, when Tong Sang’s coalition fell short of a majority, phoning Flosse to urge him to support Tong Sang.

But Flosse found it intolerable for Tong Sang to take the presidency, notwithstanding his strong showing. To the chagrin of the French State, a few days later, on 23 February, Flosse, having pledged during the election campaign that he would never again work with Temaru, struck a last-minute alliance with him, cobbling together further support from other dissidents, and became president, with Temaru as speaker of parliament. Unlike his treatment of Tong Sang, Estrosi did not congratulate Flosse, but rather ‘took note’ of his presidency (Gonschor 2009, 157). To show their concern, Nicolas Sarkozy’s UMP government in Paris expelled Flosse from the metropolitan party (Flash d’Océanie April 16 2008).

In his analysis of the results, Gonschor points to Temaru’s loss of support through the departure of his key ally, Émile Vernaudon, to Tong Sang, and disappointment with Temaru’s performance. At the same time, Tong Sang had proved skilful in consolidating a relative majority after a short time because of the desire of many for a co-operative relationship with France, particularly amongst the growing number of French settlers and the Chinese community from which Tong Sang came (Gonschor 2009, 157) and who, in the past, had supported Flosse. Flosse’s Tahoeraa indeed appeared to have retained mainly the support of rural and working class Polynesians, who tended to be critical of France and who, therefore, had more in common with Temaru, thus explaining the odd working relationship between Flosse and Temaru.

But the situation did not end there. In April 2008 Tong Sang was once again elected president with the support of bench-crossers. Secretary for Overseas France, Yves Jégo, again congratulated Tong Sang, noting that as president he reflected truly the will of the people expressed in the February elections; stating, or perhaps warning, that this time stability would prevail; and, pledging support for large-scale projects in French Polynesia.

Instability and divisions, however, continued to prevail. On 12 February 2009, following Tong Sang’s resignation as president, the assembly elected Temaru, with 37 votes of the 57 members, including support by his own Tavini but also that of Flosse’s Tahoeraa, and of a Tong Sang breakaway group Iorea Te Fenua headed by Jean-Christophe Bouissou. Tong Sang received 20 votes. The change was the tenth since 2004 elections, and the fourth time that Temaru was elected president since 2004, which suggested majority support lay with him, whatever the divisions. This time Temaru proclaimed he would govern in
a form of national unity government, to bring stability for the remainder of the term, to 2013. He consolidated his support in succeeding months to 40 of the 57 seats. In April 2009, Temaru reshuffled his cabinet to reflect differences with Flosse, retaining two Tahoeraa members who were considered to be serving in their personal capacities. By November 2009 instabilities emerged again, as the collectivity’s budget appropriation was being debated, with Tong Sang once more winning a parliamentary vote on the presidency.

In the meantime, Flosse was under personal pressure. His murky past included corruption charges, which he evaded resulting in, at most, minor charges and penalties. Amongst other charges that he faced, Flosse had been given a three-month suspended sentence in June 2006 after having been convicted of abuse of political office related to a preferential investment in a hotel by his son (see Radio New Zealand International 21 June 2006). A journalist mysteriously disappeared while investigating Flosse’s alleged involvement in the Clearstream secret accounts allegations by then Prime Minister Dominique Villepin against Sarkozy. In November 2009, however, Flosse’s immunity from prosecution, deriving from his status as French senator, was removed at the request of judges investigating irregularities in the office of posts and telecommunications. He was charged with passive corruption, embezzlement of public funds and complicity in destruction of evidence, involving alleged financial kickbacks via an advertising company that was once in charge of the French Pacific territory’s phonebook and related advertising revenues (Flash d’Océanie 24 December 2009). He was imprisoned temporarily, securing a release on bail of just under $US1 million in December, when he again took up his assembly and French senate seats. Separately, in early December, Flosse was found guilty in a ‘fictitious jobs’ scam (involving numerous jobs for friends and allies which were not seen as serving any public purpose and which were not advertised) while he was president and required to repay over $US2 million, and a hefty fine (Flash d’Océanie 24 December 2009). Gonschor (2009) enumerates many examples of the political nepotism that was rife under Flosse’s leadership.

In January 2010, in a message to Overseas France, Sarkozy foreshadowed further reforms of the electoral system and institutional mechanisms in French Polynesia, ‘in order to guarantee more stability to elected majorities and therefore to give more capacity to envisage political and public actions in the long-term’ (Sarkozy 2010a). The promise did not put an end to instability: in April 2010 Temaru was elected as speaker of the assembly, with 30 votes of the 57 members, prompting President Tong Sang to appeal to Sarkozy to dissolve the assembly given the untenable political situation.

When released in March 2011, the draft electoral reforms limited the number of cabinet members, specified a minimum five-year term for the president of the assembly, increased to two-thirds of the assembly the number of votes required
5. French Polynesia: Autonomy or independence?

for a no-confidence motion to succeed, and increased the minimum percentage of votes required for a party to proceed to the second round of votes in an election. The reforms, however, specifically included an electoral ‘bonus’ of 33 per cent (or 19 seats) to the majority in the first-past-the-post system, when it had been a similar bonus that had caused problems in 2004. Tong Sang was the only party leader to support the reforms. After another no-confidence vote, in April 2011, Temaru was once again elected president, for the fifth time in seven years. The change of government was the 13th in the same period.

In the context of division and partiality by the French State, Temaru has managed time and again to maintain leadership and a certain dignity.

Regional issues and UN reinscription demands

In a regional context, Temaru’s leadership is significant. He has maintained longstanding links with regional leaders, to whom he is well known, unlike Tong Sang, and well liked, unlike Flosse. He understands regional history and is able to play the regional and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) cards when possible. For example, in September 2007, under threat from Tong Sang’s new coalition, and being obliged to work with Flosse, Temaru used his regional contacts to dissuade some regional Polynesian island leaders from participating in a royal Polynesian gathering sponsored by a descendant of the Tahitian royal family, Joinville Pomare, with the support of Tong Sang. While representatives from New Zealand, Cook Islands, Wallis and Futuna and Hawaii attended, Temaru and Flosse successfully discouraged representatives from Western Samoa and Tonga from attending. (Pomare, like Temaru, is a pro-independence supporter, but sees a greater role for traditional leaders than Temaru, and has allied himself with Tong Sang, see Gonscher 2008, 153.)

Temaru is skilful in using his regional influence, via public calls in the region for independence and reinscription of French Polynesia with the UN, to consolidate his position in the archipelago particularly on those many occasions when the French State and others resist his electoral pull. After France’s tinkering with the electoral system and the electoral re-run of 2004, Temaru has continued to raise independence issues in the PIF. When he attended the Forum summit, following French Polynesia’s admission as an observer in 2004, he said he wanted reinscription with the UN Decolonisation Committee to be on the Forum agenda (Radio New Zealand 5 August 2004). He raised the issue at the 2006 Forum summit, where the French were quick to react, a French official saying that French Polynesia already had the capacity for self-determination and did
not need external support for what was essentially an internal matter (Nichols 2007, 118). This was redolent of the French rationale for non-cooperation with the UN in 1947.

After the passage of French unilateral legislation to change the political system yet again in 2007, at the 2007 Tonga PIF summit, Temaru called again for Forum support for reinscription, and called for an autonomy solution for French Polynesia, a ‘Tahiti Nui’ Accord, along the lines of the Noumea Accord of New Caledonia. He warned about French efforts to change statutory provisions relating to elections, and to seek further elections in early 2008 (TV New Zealand 17 October 2007). No doubt this influenced French support for other contenders in the local leadership stakes at the time (for regional reactions, see Chapter 6).

At home Temaru and his followers did not let independence issues rest either. In January 2008, his Tavini party sought signatures on a petition favouring UN reinscription. And, in June 2009, after he once again acceded to the presidency following Tong Sang’s resignation, in the context of discussions with French officials in the wake of violent protests in Guadeloupe, Temaru said that the issue of sovereignty (as distinct from a complete break with France) needed to be discussed, and proposed discussions of an alternative name for French Polynesia, such as Tahiti Nui (the Greater Tahiti) or Maohi Nui (the Greater Indigenous people) (Radio New Zealand website <http://www.radionz.co.nz> 16 and 17 June 2009 accessed 19 June 2009).

When Noumea hosted the UN Decolonisation Committee’s 2010 Pacific regional seminar, Temaru visited Noumea and staged a protest outside the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) headquarters, where the meeting was being held. While claiming that he was not speaking as the French Polynesian speaker, but in the name of the Maohi or indigenous people (Flash d’Océanie 18 May 2010), he asserted that, if they won the next election, they would declare the country independent and sovereign. He again called for reinscription of French Polynesia with the UN (La Depêche de Tahiti 21 May 2010). By July 2011, his party began to lobby regional governments (Personal communication, Tuheiava 2011).

The PIF leaders’ response to Temaru’s calls for support has been measured. They have not to take a position on the question of reinscription of French Polynesia with the UN Decolonisation Committee, but have instead used their communiqués to consistently urge France and French Polynesia to work together for French Polynesia’s self-determination. Once again, in 2011, the Forum leaders recalled their 2004 decision to support the principle of French Polynesia’s right to self-determination. They reiterated their encouragement to
French Polynesia and France to seek an agreed approach on how to realise French Polynesia’s right to self-determination (PIF Communiqué 2011).

There are signs, however, that regional support for Temaru is growing. On the eve of the 2011 PIF meeting, a number of leaders met (from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Nauru, Tonga, Timor Leste, Kiribati, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Marshall Islands and French Polynesia), and signed their own communiqué indicating that Leaders supported the re-inscription of French Polynesia/Tahiti Nui on the UN Decolonisation Committee’s list as the first step in the process of self-determination, at international level (Nadi Communiqué 2011).

As always in the Pacific, the role of civil society with a reach into the region has been important. The Pacific Conference of Churches and the World Council of Churches have supported French Polynesia’s inscription, the latter calling for self-determination for the people of ‘Maohi Nui’, maohi referring to the ancestral French Polynesian people (see World Council 2012).

French Polynesia increasingly looks to New Caledonia as a model for its own political development. French Polynesia signed an agreement to work more closely with the other French Pacific entities in February 2010. At the time, then assembly speaker and pro-France leader, Philip Schyle, said that he was interested in how aspects of New Caledonia’s congress and the institutional arrangements under the Noumea Accord might apply to French Polynesia (Nouvelles Calédoniennes 26 February 2010). But encouraging closer consultative relations between the three French Pacific entities enables France to provide a regional alternative for French Polynesia to Temaru’s support within the PIF. In time, depending on how the grouping evolves, and on whether or not the French entities become full members of the PIF, it could represent a pro-France ginger group, or sub-group, within the PIF. As such, it will be encouraged by France.

**Economy**

Unlike New Caledonia, French Polynesia’s economy offers no single valuable resource to fuel its economy. For most of the second half of the twentieth century, its mainstay has been income derived from France’s nuclear testing, directly, until cessation of the tests in 1996; and, since then, from massive compensation payouts over periods that have successively been extended. This means that the French budgetary contribution is far higher than in New Caledonia, around a third (of the total GDP of CFP536.3 billion ($A6.8 billion, converted 24 February

All political players understand this dependence. Thus, when Temaru talks about independence, he also speaks of a continuing role for France, for example as noted in his favouring a formula of association with France. No one doubts that any form of independence would require continuing aid from France. And France, by constant reference to its largesse, has made it clear that independence would mean French Polynesia going it alone.

Local resources are minimal and based mainly on tourism and pearl exports. The high cost structure makes it an expensive place to visit, so the number of tourists is unlikely to increase and indeed has hovered around 210,000 per year since 2004. In 2007, 218,000 tourists visited, mainly from the United States, metropolitan France, Europe, and Japan. Global conditions resulted in a drop to 196,496 in 2008, and 160,000 in 2009, with large decreases from all destinations other than metropolitan France. This has led the major hotels to re-think their presence and, by early 2010, the Tahiti Hilton was set to close (La Dépêche de Tahiti 11 March 2010). Although Flosse secured the identification of French Polynesia as a target tourist destination by the People’s Republic of China, so far his efforts have not been rewarded by an influx of Chinese tourists. Services, mainly tourist-related, dominate the economy, employing 54,000 of 69,000 total salaried workers in 2007.

Pearl exports are valuable but a modest and declining proportion of total exports (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 French Polynesia — Contribution of pearl exports to total exports 2006–2008

<table>
<thead>
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<th>In millions of CFPa</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total exports</td>
<td>22,380 ($A284.4 million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl exports</td>
<td>11,098 ($A141.0 million)</td>
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</tbody>
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a. $A converted 24 February 2010


Although successive governments have nominated fisheries as a development priority, for various reasons, including migration of fishing stocks, inadequate
infrastructure, high local costs, and the increasing habit of importing frozen fish from France, fisheries have not taken off and sales from local production have declined from 683 tonnes in 2004 to 539 tonnes in 2007, rising to 612 tonnes in 2008 (ISPF 2008 <http://www.ispf.pf> accessed 28 October 2008 and 24 February 2010).

**Metropolitan handling and institutional factors**

As in New Caledonia, the French State has continued to play a behind-the-scenes role to push the local leadership in a pro-France direction, notwithstanding the democratically expressed sentiments of the local people. Its failed early support for Flosse, including by introducing statutory measures specifically designed to bolster his majority, were followed by a distinct public preference for Tong Sang over Temaru. No supportive public statements were made by French officials when Temaru was elected in 2004; instead a re-election was held in which, once again, he won without comment from the French State. And the French State was again quiet following Temaru’s subsequent election in early 2009.

As for New Caledonia, senior officials in Paris dealing with French Polynesia have generally been individuals with little experience of the Pacific region (see Chapter 4). It may be unsurprising that the period of instability from 2004 coincided with a period of resident French High Commissioners (after the departure of High Commissioner Michel Mathieu for Noumea in 2005) who, although highly trained professionals from the interior ministry, were not particularly experienced in regional affairs or even with previous experience in French Polynesia itself. This changed with the arrival in early 2011 of Richard Didier, who at least had spent two years in Wallis and Futuna.

**Conclusion**

The recent history of French Polynesia demonstrates the mixed legacy of France’s presence in the Pacific. Because of the dominance of personality-driven politics, with the small-time corruption and nepotism that that implies, the dynamics have evolved around the French State’s preference for the archipelago to be led by a pro-France big man, rather than an avowed pro-independence indigenous leader. Thus, France has taken a partisan, interventionist position, with constant reminders of the archipelago’s dependence on French largesse, which has encouraged a venal coalescence of interests between the local pro-France and autonomist supporters who switch allegiance for personal gain, defying French efforts to consolidate the pro-French grouping. Frequent statutory change has been imposed without full consultation and assent by the local assembly. The
fact that the economy of French Polynesia offers no dominant resource such as New Caledonia’s nickel, and that its principal resources — tourism, pearls, and fisheries — offer limited scope for development, means that the collectivity would be less likely than New Caledonia to survive as an independent entity without substantial French aid. It is arguable that the instability arising from local, personality driven politics, corruption, and French interference, which ensures a weak economy dependent on France, serves French interest in remaining in French Polynesia. But as such, these elements of the political scene create ongoing uncertainty and instability, which is ripe for exploitation, particularly should a sufficiently motivated and powerful leader emerge.

In French Polynesia, as in New Caledonia, the UN and PIF remain relevant venting points for dissatisfied pro-independentists, Temaru having raised the issue of reinscription of French Polynesia with the UN Committee of Decolonisation in the Forum, making himself visible at the committee’s regional seminar in Noumea in May 2010, and lobbying regional governments in July 2011. In contrast to the second half of the last century, when French Polynesia was France’s most important strategic asset in the Pacific, with the cessation of nuclear testing, it has now been displaced by New Caledonia in strategic significance for France. Nonetheless, serious problems or questions about French Polynesia’s status, particularly on the international and regional stage, will have flow-on effects for France’s status relative to New Caledonia. There are signs of regional support for Temaru’s call for reinscription, potentially raising difficulties for France, reminiscent of regional opposition in the 1980s.

The French State has reacted to Temaru’s periodic efforts to draw regional attention to French Polynesia’s dependent status, by seeking to dislodge him from power over the last five years. This raises questions about respect for democratic principles in French Polynesia, and also reflects France’s determination to retain control over French Polynesia, and its other Pacific collectivities.