

French riot police dispatched to Tahiti following election upset

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Early this month, the French government sent 300 riot police from mobile gendarmerie units to the Pacific island of Tahiti following a major upset in the May 23 French Polynesian territorial elections. In a reversal of 20 years of Gaullist political rule, President Gaston Flosse's incumbent Tahoeraa Huiraatira Party (Popular Union, THP) lost its majority, winning only 28 seats in an expanded 57-seat assembly. The French government justified the police deployment on the grounds that it was necessary to maintain "law and order" and for the electoral process to proceed in a "serene" climate.

Flosse's ejection from office was received with alarm in Paris. Brigitte Girardin, minister in charge of overseas departments and territories, promptly declared that the electoral process was "far from over" and warned French opposition Socialists not to "rejoice too soon" over the electoral gains of the Union for Democracy (UPD), led by pro-independence opposition leader Oscar Temaru. Referring to support given by French Socialist Party to the UPD, Girardin bitterly accused the Socialists of pursuing a policy of "dismembering the republic", wanting to abandon the overseas territories, and get rid of the 2.5 million French citizens outside the country.

The riot police were sent to support a series of desperate manoeuvres by Flosse designed to intimidate his opponents and cling to office. Hard on the heels of the election result, Flosse addressed a rally of his supporters, denouncing the new coalition government forming around the UPD and accusing it of being incapable of governing. The French High Commission in Pape'ete issued an ominous statement declaring that, while it had an obligation to remain neutral over the election's outcome, it would do whatever was required to maintain stability.

Flosse initially announced that, despite the electoral loss, he would contest the positions of assembly and territorial president. These are both determined by secret ballot in the legislature. Declaring he would "fight to the very end" to remain in power, he also revealed his intention to file an appeal with the Council of State in Paris (France's top administrative tribunal) to declare the elections null and void because of purported irregularities concerning the size of ballot papers used by some parties in the Windward Islands.

The political stalemate continued for the next two weeks, as Temaru negotiated with the leaders of minor parties to form a government. The UPD, a coalition of four smaller parties, had won 27 seats, two short of an absolute majority. Temaru was able to win the support of two further opposition "autonomy" parties, No Oe E Te Nunaa (This Country is Yours), led by Nicole Bouteau and Fetia Api (New Star), led by Philip Schyle. Both parties had secured one seat each. In a sign of divisions within the local ruling elite Bouteau, who recently resigned as tourism and environment minister, had set up her new party just before the election. She promptly ruled out supporting Flosse's bid to form a new government.

The arrival of the riot police triggered popular hostility. Bouteau was forced to denounce the move as an overreaction to French Polynesia's

"period of transition after the 'Flosse system'". She also voiced concern at comments made by Girardin in the French parliament implying France might end financial commitments to its Polynesian territories, calling on the colonial power to keep its financial "faucets" open. However, she cautioned that what she feared most was the "social uproar" if Flosse were to be successful in his bid to have the election result overturned.

The UPD's victory was confirmed when the legislature was convened on June 4 and the party's candidate for the Assembly's presidency, former public servant Antony Geros, won by one vote from the THP's Emile Vernaudon. Flosse immediately withdrew his candidature for territorial president, leaving the way open for Temaru to be appointed unopposed. Flosse, however, announced plans for further legal challenges to the election result, immediately filing to have the election of the parliamentary speaker nullified on the grounds that the distribution of officeholders within the new parliament did not reflect a true proportionality. The state council quickly ruled against Flosse.

The election itself had assumed the character of a plebiscite on Flosse's rule. A week before the poll, some 2,500 people marched through downtown Pape'ete supporting the main opposition parties and carrying a variety of signs demanding a change of government. Temaru had called for the protests "to overturn the government in place and install a political change"—as French voters had recently done in regional elections.

A key factor in the result was the large voter turnout, which ranged from 76 to 85 percent across the main electorates. Flosse's worst setback occurred in the most populated Windward Islands of Tahiti—where the capital Pape'ete is located—and Moorea. Here, Flosse's THP won only 11 of the 37 electorate seats, compared with the UPD's 24 seats and the minor opposition parties one seat each. Flosse only managed to dominate in the Leeward Islands, which include the popular tourist destinations of Bora, Raiatea, Tahaa and Huahine, where he won six of the eight seats. Overall, the UPD won 41 percent of the vote, the THP 40 percent, Fetia Api 7 percent and No Oe E Te Nunaa 6 percent.

The result was a stunning reversal for right-wing Gaullist politics in French Polynesia. Just two years before, in the second round of the French presidential elections, Jacques Chirac had obtained a higher percentage of the votes in the Pacific territories (88 percent) than he did in most constituencies in France (82 percent). In the same election, far-right candidate Le Pen received 12 percent of French Polynesian votes.

The election exposed overwhelming popular resentment over the Flosse administration's policies, which have seen a worsening economic crisis, declining living standards and widening social inequality. The Tahitian class structure reflects the worst features of colonial rule. An affluent ruling clique, subsidised by the French state, enjoys a privileged lifestyle. Highly paid French expatriate civil servants, for instance, earn 84 percent higher salaries than their counterparts in France and are required to pay no personal income tax. Meanwhile, an estimated 20,000 poor and unemployed Tahitians live in slums or *bidonvilles* on the outskirts of Pape'ete.

Tourism accounts for a quarter of GDP and is a primary source of hard currency earnings. The 70,000-strong labour force depends overwhelmingly on the tourism and service sectors, which account for 68 percent of all jobs. In the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States, the tourist industry suffered from the ensuing worldwide recession. Hotel occupancy rates, particularly in Tahiti, declined. Two airlines withdrew services, while a Florida-based company which deployed two 700-passenger ships for inter-island cruises in French Polynesia collapsed. In 2001, black pearls accounted for 81 percent of all exports, but post-11 September, as well as the crisis in tourism, black pearl sales dropped markedly. The Flosse government pretended that the crisis would soon pass.

The territory retains financial dependency on France. A small manufacturing sector processes mainly agricultural products. As a result, the territory imports over five times as much as it exports, with over 50 percent of imports originating from the EU, making the cost of living the highest in the Pacific. With the halt of French nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll in 1996, the very significant military component of the economy fell sharply. The French nuclear testing centre alone provided over 12 percent of local employment, 55 percent of the funding inflow, 28 percent of imports and 22 percent of GDP.

Although measures of financial aid were put in place, the unemployment rate, which was already nearly 12 percent, increased rapidly. The deteriorating social and economic situation has exacerbated already explosive class conflicts. These are not new to Tahiti. In 1987 the French High Commissioner used riot police flown from Paris to suppress a dockworkers' strike, leading to rioting by unemployed youth and \$US50 million in damage. Fresh rioting in 1991 forced the territorial government to cancel tax increases on petrol, alcohol and tobacco—i.e., on goods used by the poor—intended to finance a \$73.4 million budget deficit.

Social tensions have resurfaced during the past two years. In May 2003 an unprecedented three-week general strike by public and private medical doctors followed a protest march by 2,500 health professionals on Flosse's presidential palace. The strike was in opposition to a plan to impose a ceiling on the yearly level of reimbursed health care. Striking doctors said that the proposed changes to social support placed the entire health care system at risk. Flosse dismissed the doctors, saying they had "no mandate by the people" and it was not their place "to question our health system". The court deemed the strike illegal and ordered health workers to resume work, while ruling that the union pay one million French Pacific francs (\$10,000) per day of any subsequent strike.

Meanwhile, Flosse narrowly escaped possible corruption probes when in 2002 a Paris appeals court ruled that a recent French government amnesty law prevented a prosecution appeal over his earlier acquittal on charges dealing with a patrimony declaration. The case related to monies and property Flosse had transferred to his wife's name over the 1993-96 period when he was both president of French Polynesia and one of the two Tahitian representatives at the French National Assembly. Flosse's reputation for fixing government contracts while Secretary of State for the South Pacific in the late 1980s earned him the title of "Mr. Ten Percent" by the French newspaper *Libération*. Befitting his elite status, Flosse's personal lawyer was also a top legal advisor to the French president.

The decision by the French government to increase police presence in the territory is more than an immediate response to the election outcome. The sharp response from Paris is an indication of deepening tensions and instability across the Pacific. Mounting popular opposition to French rule is evident throughout its territories. In New Caledonia, provincial elections last month saw the anti-independence Rally for Caledonia in the Republic (RPCR) lose its majority when it tied on 16 seats with a new party, Avenir Ensemble (Future Together), formed by a number of business people and former members of the RPCR. The parliament will be forced to elect another government after the new administration collapsed

last week, just three hours after being formed.

These events represent a threat to France's long-term strategic interests in the Pacific region, at the very point where inter-imperial rivalries between the long-standing colonial powers are re-emerging. Moves by France to increase its influence are cutting across the plans of Australia and New Zealand.

Last year, in the aftermath of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Australian government led an aggressive intervention into the Solomon Islands—but pointedly rejected any French involvement. As Australian Prime Minister Howard was launching the operation, French President Chirac was touring France's Pacific territories—the first trip to the region by a French head of state since 1995, when he ordered the resumption of nuclear testing in French Polynesia. During his latest visit, Chirac defended the testing and pointed to the reasons for his visit: "Without Polynesia, France would not be the big power that it is, capable of expressing an independent respected position in the concert of nations." He went on to convene a "France-Oceania" summit in Pape'ete to "revitalise dialogue and cooperation" with Pacific Island states.

Historically, France has occupied a prominent position as a colonial power in the Pacific. It has ruled its three main territories—French Polynesia, New Caledonia and the Wallis and Futuna Islands—since the onset of European colonialism in the nineteenth century, giving it control over vast areas of the South Pacific Ocean. In the 1960s, even as Britain and New Zealand ceded independence to Samoa, the Cook Islands and other former territories, France resisted. Despite having been granted certain limited concessions in the face of movements for self-rule, all three territories remain French possessions. For a decade in the 1980s, civil war conditions erupted in New Caledonia after the French Socialist government of Francois Mitterrand reneged on a 1981 election promise to recognise the right to self-determination of the indigenous Kanaks.

New Caledonia itself is a key source of raw materials for France, its high-grade nickel, used in the manufacture of high-tensile metals for the lucrative French armaments industry, of particular value. The French government has declared nickel a "strategic" metal, and carefully controls the conditions of its extraction and exploitation. Mining permits require special approval, and French commercial interests are protected by requirements for 50 percent French participation in foreign investment.

French Polynesia, on the eastern side of the Pacific, is strategically located close to both North and South America. Its geographical value was underlined when the French nuclear testing facilities were moved there from Algeria after the latter won independence. Following the end of World War II, the Pacific region became the chief nuclear testing ground for the US, Britain and France. The French program at Moruroa atoll was by far the most extensive and intrusive. Over a 30-year period, beginning in 1966, France detonated 46 atomic bombs in atmospheric tests and exploded 147 underground. The French government's response to public opposition was to carry out an act of state terror—in 1985 the Greenpeace protest ship Rainbow Warrior was blown up by secret service agents as it was moored in Auckland harbour, killing a crewman.

France has also used its own territories as bases for wider political operations. In Fiji, during the two coups by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987, France maintained relations with Suva while Australia and New Zealand suspended aid. France signalled support for the interim governments installed after both coups, sending Flosse to discuss aid projects. In 1987, two French patrol boats made port calls to Suva and carried out manoeuvres with the Fijian navy. In 1988, France announced an aid package worth \$A8 million that included trucks and a helicopter which were used by the Fijian army. In 1993, France and Fiji agreed to commence military exchanges.

In 1990, Suva asked France to assume the responsibility of aerial surveillance of Fiji's exclusive economic zone. Previously, such maritime surveillance had been performed by the New Zealand Air Force.

Similarly, France has, over the past decade, increased its naval presence in the Cook Islands, and periodically carries out surveillance of the Cooks' territorial waters, an area of 2.2 million square kilometres traditionally part of New Zealand's sphere of influence. The Cook Islands government has welcomed French loans and aid as a supplement to New Zealand financial assistance, which dropped from around 44 percent of the Cook Islands' GDP in 1976 to about 14 percent in the early 1990s.

The former opposition parties now making up the new government have assumed office by exploiting the rising sentiment against Flosse and the ruling elite. However, they have done so by carefully refraining from making specific promises. The central platform of the UPD has been to seek financial compensation for the 15,000 Polynesian workers who have suffered the ill effects of the atomic testing program and who last year held a demonstration through Pape'ete to press their claims, and independence from France. Temaru, who has established himself over many years as the recognised political voice for independence, maintains that French Polynesia is occupied territory.

However, speaking at her party's inaugural ceremony just prior to the election, Bouteau ruled out independence, saying "France is our country and we need France to carry out our action". Her party's main objective was to promote long-term development for French Polynesia in a global environment marked by the effects of "modernity, globalization". In response to a bid by Temaru to make a small increase in the level of the minimum monthly wage to 150,000 French Pacific francs (\$US1,158)—from 110,000 French Pacific francs (\$1,579) in the public sector and \$850 in the private sector—Bouteau declared that such an increase, although still inadequate, should not be made "brutally", but in stages over a period of time.

The indications are that Paris is already pulling the new government into line by Paris—aided by the presence of 300 riot police. To the surprise of vast numbers of his supporters, Temaru has already rushed to assure the French authorities that independence is not on the agenda. He declared that the election involved only the French Polynesian Assembly and was not a "referendum on independence". With Tahiti having lots of work to do to "prepare the economic groundwork for an eventual independence", such a referendum, he insisted, was at least 10 to 15 years away.

The sources consulted in the preparation of this article included:

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See Also:

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