Protracted crisis following government ouster in French Polynesia

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French Polynesia has been in the throes of an unprecedented political crisis after the conservative opposition, with the tacit support of the Chirac government in Paris, engineered the ousting of pro-independence leader Oscar Temaru and his coalition government in early October.

Temaru's Union for Democracy alliance refused to recognise the installation of longtime Chirac ally Gaston Flosse as president and has held a series of protests to demand fresh elections throughout the French territory to settle the issue. The government has been effectively paralysed as outraged Temaru supporters occupied the presidential office and blockaded key public offices in the Tahitian capital of Pape'ete.

Strikes and protests involving thousands of workers continued last week for an increased minimum wage and to oppose the ousting of the Temaru administration. Last Wednesday some 2,000 hotel workers in the tourism industry struck, while another 1,000 workers marched through downtown Pape'ete and public servants renewed pickets outside government offices. Up to 300 occupied the government's data processing department.

In what is a highly political decision on Monday, the Council of State—France's highest administrative court—ignored the protests and ruled against new elections throughout the French territory. Instead the court annulled the results only in the Windward Islands (Tahiti and Moorea) on the basis of alleged "voting irregularities"—a move proposed by Flosse who calculated it would assist him in consolidating his grip on power.

The roots of the crisis lie in the refusal of the ruling elites in Paris and Pape'ete to accept the outcome of the territory's poll on May 23. After 20 years of rule, Flosse's own Tahoeraa Huiraatira party (Popular Union, THP) was defeated for the first time and replaced by a coalition led by Temaru's pro-independence Tavini Huiraatira (Polynesia Liberation Front, THP)—a result that alarmed Paris. Brigitte Girardin, the French minister in charge of overseas departments and territories, criticised those who hailed the outcome of seeking the "dismemberment of the republic" and promptly warned that the electoral process was "far from over".

Just as it has been using military force to secure the interests of French imperialism in its former African colonies, the Chirac government did not hesitate to act aggressively in Polynesia. In the wake of the May elections, France dispatched 300 riot police to Tahiti in an attempt to intimidate the new administration. The French High Commission declared that it would do whatever was required to "maintain stability".

French Polynesia has long been an important base of operations within the Asia Pacific region for French imperialism, which has strenuously resisted any move to independence. The territory consists of 118 coral atolls spread over an area the size of Australia and has a population of about 201,000. Following the French withdrawal from Algeria in the early 1960s, it became the site for France's nuclear testing program for nearly 30 years. While the influx of military personnel benefitted a tiny privileged layer, most French Polynesians continued to live in poverty. The end of French nuclear testing and the recent turndown in tourism has only exacerbated the territory's economic difficulties and heightened political and social tensions.

Temaru responded to French threats by attempting to appease the ruling elites in Paris and Pape'ete. His THP was formed in 1975 with the stated goal of winning independence by the year 2000 and transforming the country into a "self sustaining nation". However, upon taking office in early June, he quickly reassured French authorities declaring that independence was at least 15 years away and dependent on the pace of economic development towards "self sufficiency".

However, Temaru's social program, though very limited, provoked opposition from employers and the political establishment. His government planned to establish a body to examine the impact of nuclear testing on the health of the workers involved, as well as of the inhabitants on nearby islands, potentially opening the way for thousands of legal claims. It also planned to increase the minimum monthly wage from its current level of 110,000 French Pacific francs ($US1,195) to 150,000 francs, but over a five-year period.

The four-month-old government was brought down by a censure motion passed in the territory's 57-seat Assembly on October 8. The motion was preceded by a complicated maneouvre engineered by Flosse to establish a new parliamentary group—Te Ara. Three former members of Flosse's party joined three unaffiliated MPs to meet the minimum requirement of six seats for a formally recognised Assembly group.

Te Ara, formed behind closed doors and with no popular mandate, then became the fulcrum for a parliamentary re-alignment, forcing Temaru's government to slip from commanding a one-seat majority to a one-seat minority. On October 6, Flosse's opposition party reneged on previous reassurances to the government and announced its plans for a censure motion. It accused the government of economic

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mismanagement, claiming there had been "stagnation" in key areas of the economy for the previous month and that the economic situation was rapidly getting worse.

Temaru in turn accused of Flosse of using anti-democratic and "mafia methods" to try to "steal the victory" that had been won by popular ballot at the May 23 election. Temaru claimed Flosse was primarily motivated by fears that a proposed financial audit would uncover "certain things that can end up with legal penalties" and implicate the previous government. A preliminary report published on October 21 indicated that the former administration had about 100 fictitious employees on its books, each receiving up to 3,500 Euros per month.

In the wake of Temaru's ousting, the French government dismissed his appeals for fresh elections and openly backed efforts to install Flosse as the territory's president. Territories minister Girardin told the French National Assembly that the no-confidence motion was "part of the democratic process" and that Tahiti's institutions were "functioning normally".

In Pape'ete, France's High Commissioner Michel Matthieu pushed through a vote in the territory's assembly on a new president. He twice admonished Assembly leader Antony Geros, a member of Temaru's coalition, for not holding a vote prior to October 24 and then called on the third Assembly vice president, Lana Tetuanui, a member of Flosse's party, to convene the legislature. Geros had scheduled the vote for October 25.

These political machinations provoked widespread popular opposition. On October 16, more than 20,000 people marched through the centre of Pape'ete, the biggest demonstration in the capital for many years, shouting "One, two, three dissolution!" and "Taui" (Change). An estimated 1,700 people travelled from Tahiti's sister island of Moorea to participate, while the first-ever political marches were held in the Marquesas Islands, the Tuamotus, Astrals and Leeward Islands.

After further prodding from Matthieu, Tetuanui convened the Assembly on October 20 to elect a new president. The sitting was boycotted by members of Temaru's coalition, causing the vote to fail due to the lack of a quorum. Geros protested the move to the French State Council, saying it was illegal for the sitting to be chaired by the third deputy. The council, however, rejected the claim, along with two more petitions from Temaru that the censure motion itself be rescinded on legal and procedural grounds.

At a parliamentary session on October 23, Flosse was finally installed as president by a one-vote majority. Temaru and Geros, who boycotted the session, refused to recognise the vote, describing it as nothing more than election for "the president of the Taheraa Huiraatira" (Flosse's party). Still hoping to force a dissolution of the parliament, Temaru occupied Tahiti's presidential headquarters where he began a "spiritual fast", saying the country now had two presidents—"one who was legitimately elected by the people on May 23 and the other who is self-declared". Matthieu, however, intervened again to declare Flosse to be the legitimate president.

Substantial sections of the population backed Temaru, refusing to recognise the vote as the territory's government fell into disarray. On November 4, dozens of protesters, carrying signs reading "Legitimate and peaceful occupation of public offices", blocked entry to state and local government offices, including the government printing office, the Rural Development Department, the Public Works Ministry, the Finance Ministry, the passport office and the office controlling French and local government spending in the territory.

Increasingly concerned at the "outpourings on both sides", the influential leader of the Maohi Protestant Church issued a statement calling for new elections, saying that the way of "the ballot box" was the only way "towards a peaceful solution for return to calm and serenity". Elsewhere in the Pacific, political leaders began expressing concern over the protracted crisis, with appeals to Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, the current chairman of the Pacific Islands Forum, to have the Forum formally intervene.

Alarmed at the growing protest movement, Temaru also began calling for "calm". He appealed to his supporters to allow the matter to be left in the hands of the official political parties so that a "civilised war" could be conducted. Further attempting to defuse the situation, Temaru again turned to French authorities, filing another set of motions with the French Council of State and the European Parliament speaker in Brussels.

A delegation representing the parties in Temaru's coalition travelled to Paris to appeal to the French authorities in person and to garner support from opposition parties. The Chirac government has, however, rejected appeals by the opposition Socialist Party to hold new elections in Polynesia. Girardin told the National Assembly that this would only encourage "Oscar Temaru and his friends to believe that his dream of independence has become a reality". She insisted that, "French Polynesia isn't an independent state" but a "local authority within the Republic, in which the law applies."

In response to Temaru's motions, Flosse disputed the results in the Windward Islands (Tahiti and Moorea) where Temaru's coalition won 24 of the 37 seats in the May election. Flosse claimed that pressure had been put on voters because the polling booths were decorated with the colours of the independence movement. On this spurious basis, the Chirac government promptly backed Flosse. The French Council of State decided on Monday not only to reject Temaru's call for a new election, but acceded to Flosse's motion for the poll to be annulled in the Windward Islands.

Having appealed to his supporters to place their faith in the French courts, Temaru is likely to now call for them to accept the decision and further wind back the protests. Regardless of the immediate shifts and turns in the situation, none of the underlying social, economic and political tensions have been resolved. Even if Flosse survives the present political storm, his government is regarded as illegitimate by broad layers of the population and will inevitably confront fresh crises in the not-too-distant future.

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