

Pro-independence parties topple government following Tahiti by-election

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For the second time in less than a year, long-time pro-independence leader Oscar Temaru was elected French Polynesia president last Thursday in the French territory's Assembly. Temaru won by a three-vote margin over challenger Gaston Tong Sang representing the Tahoeraa Huiraatira party (THP) led by former President Gaston Flosse. The 57-member Assembly voted 29-26 in favor of Temaru. The remaining two ballots were blank. The election had earlier been postponed when the THP members boycotted the Assembly on Monday, leaving only 31 of the 35 members required for a quorum.

A week earlier, the Assembly passed a no confidence motion filed by Temaru, which successfully toppled the pro-Gaullist Flosse government after just four months in office. All 30 representatives present in the 57-seat Assembly voted for the motion, while members of Flosse's THP absented themselves. The ousting of Flosse was the culmination of a protracted political crisis following national elections in May.

The no confidence vote followed a February 13 by-election for the Windward Islands electorates, which encompass the main islands of Tahiti and Moorea and represent two thirds of the country's 250,000 population. A grouping of six pro-independence parties under the leadership of Temaru won just over 6,000 more votes than the THP. Both parties ended up with 27 Assembly seats and Flosse had refused to resign from office.

After being installed, Temaru hastened to assure the political elites in Tahiti and Paris that independence is "not on the agenda". The question, he said, would only be debated "if the population wishes to." He also called for a "united approach" to governing French Polynesia and an end to a "statutory one-upmanship". Temaru promised that his government's aims would be

"reunification" and, in view of territory's current economic situation, voters "must not return to the ballot boxes before four years".

The by-election result, however, demonstrated that there is widespread popular opposition to the right-wing Flosse government and French rule as a whole. In a record turnout of nearly 80 percent of registered voters, Temaru's coalition, the Union for Democracy (UPLD), won 41,785 votes (nearly 47 percent), with the THP taking just 35,577 (40 percent) and the Alliance for a New Democracy (ADN) 9,395 (10.6 percent).

The UPLD won 12 of the seats contested, the THP 10 seats and the ADN 2 seats. There were 20 seats not involved in the by-election. The two ADN representatives subsequently supported Temaru's no-confidence motion, as did a former ADN member who has since moved to join the UPLD. An important factor in Temaru's victory was a peculiarity of the voting system that provides a 13-seat "bonus" to the party with the highest number of votes. Originally designed by Flosse and the French government for the 2004 elections to entrench Flosse in power, the electoral ruse backfired badly to give Temaru's coalition a narrow majority.

The by-election result was a decisive rebuff to the colonial authorities in Paris and to Flosse who was determined to maintain his grip on power after 20 years in office. The by-election was ordered last November by the Council of State, France's highest administrative court, which had annulled the results of the May elections in the Windward Islands following a protest by Flosse over alleged "voting irregularities". The complaint was entirely spurious, amounting to nothing more than an accusation that voting booths in the affected electorates had been decorated with the colours

of the UPLD.

In the May elections, Flosse lost office for the first time, with the Windward Islands—in particular the poor suburbs in the capital Pape’ete—providing a key electoral base for Temaru’s coalition. However, after assuming the presidency, Temaru himself was ousted after just four months. His single-vote majority was overturned when Flosse successfully connived with three independent politicians to form a new parliamentary grouping, Te Ara, and to support his THP. Flosse’s manoeuvres had, at the very least, the tacit approval of the Chirac government in Paris, with the French embassy in Pape’ete declaring it would do whatever was required to “maintain stability”.

Temaru’s ousting triggered widespread popular unrest. His followers mounted the largest ever protest march with over 22,000 participants and collected 43,000 signatures calling for a full dissolution of the Assembly and new general elections. They also paralysed the government by occupying the presidential office and blockading key public offices in Pape’ete. The turmoil intersected with strikes and protests by thousands of workers demanding an immediate increase in the minimum wage.

In response to the rising tide of anti-Flosse and pro-independence sentiment, the French government dispatched 300 special riot police to the territory to, in the words of Brigitte Girardin, the minister in charge of overseas territories, prevent the “dismemberment of the republic”. The riot police remained in Tahiti throughout the crisis, and were visible in force on the streets during the by-election. Despite this police intimidation, the election proceeded in an enthusiastic, festive atmosphere, with large crowds in many public places displaying party flags.

Flosse no doubt assumed that under conditions of political crisis and with the overt support of the French state and local elites, the votes of minor parties and previously undecided electors would return to him. However, his strategy failed. Four minor parties and so-called “independents”, including the Bouteau-Schyle led ADN, lost votes—not to Flosse, but to Temaru. The UPLD won a larger share of the popular vote than in May. It won the popular votes in the City of Pape’ete, the islands of Moorea and neighbouring Maiao, and three communes on the island of Tahiti, all of which Flosse’s party took in previous elections.

Despite Temaru’s victory, the political situation remains unstable and volatile. While ADN leaders Bouteau and Schyle voted to oust Flosse, they refused to join the ruling coalition as they did after the May elections. The Temaru grouping was initially one vote short of an absolute majority, but managed to recruit a THP member, giving it 29 seats and a 2-seat margin—for now.

The French government, through Territories Minister Girardin, has called on all parties to display a “sense of responsibility” so that the territory does not “fall into instability”. Girardin declared she was available for discussions so as “to foster the emergence of a local consensus”.

The French authorities are depending on Temaru to rein in the opposition movement and he has already indicated his willingness to carry out the task. After his success in the May elections, he declared that discussions on independence were at least 15 years away, and required satisfactory progress towards economic independence from France. He was also instrumental in diverting the strikes and protests into safe official channels by making his own appeals to the Council of State.

In outlining his economic program this week, Temaru played down previous promises to raise the minimum wage, instead concentrating on measures to boost the tourism industry. Like Flosse, Temaru has no solutions to the widespread poverty and deprivation that exist in Tahiti. As the expectations of those voted for him are shattered, Temaru is likely to find himself the object of growing hostility and protests.



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