

French Polynesian president faces deepening crisis over pro-independence comments

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In a significant political setback for French Polynesia President Oscar Temaru, the incumbent speaker Antony Géros in the territory's assembly was narrowly defeated by 29 to 28 votes on April 13. The successful candidate, Philip Schyle, represents one of two small parties that favour more autonomy for the territory, but oppose Temaru's calls for outright independence from France.

The vote followed the resignation of two cabinet ministers from Temaru's governing coalition. Emile Vernaudeau, leader of one of the "pro-autonomy" parties, resigned as Minister of Post and Telecommunications on April 11 citing Temaru's statements on independence. Another minister, Hiro Tefaarere, had earlier resigned his portfolio and membership of Temaru's party, blaming internal government dissension.

Vernaudeau stated that the ruling coalition had agreed that independence "would not be part of the program" during Temaru's five-year mandate as president. Since taking office, however, Temaru had not "stopped calling loud and strong during each official voyage to a foreign country for a path of independence," Vernaudeau said. "We can't run this land without having guarantees from the (French) Republic... It's not possible."

France has occupied the 118 Pacific coral atolls including the largest, Tahiti, since 1842 and strenuously resisted any move to independence. Following its withdrawal from Algeria in the early 1960s, French Polynesia became the site for France's nuclear testing program for nearly 30 years. While the influx of military personnel benefited a small privileged layer, most Polynesians continued to live in poverty. The end of nuclear testing has only exacerbated economic difficulties and heightened political and social tensions.

Temaru's Tahoeraa Huiraatira party (Popular Union) was formed in 1975 with the stated goal of establishing independence by 2000 and transforming the country into a "self sustaining nation". He won the 2004 election on the basis of a pro-independence campaign that offered limited social reforms, but immediately moved to reassure the

French authorities that independence was "not on the agenda". Since then, Temaru has revived the question of independence to bolster his flagging popular support amid growing economic difficulties and continuing moves to oust him.

Late last year a four-day general strike by public sector workers resulted in the deferment of a controversial new tax plan. The strike was called by a confederation of unions opposed to an increase in the "solidarity" tax on wages and retirement income. The government was seeking to raise more revenue from higher paid employees to implement its election promises, including a monthly pay rise for salaried employees of 6,000 French Pacific Francs (\$US61.22) and an increase in the minimum wage from 125,000 to 131,000 FPF.

The plan was primarily aimed at French public servants who dominate the state administration and enjoy far higher living standards than most of the indigenous population. The tax proposal accentuated divisions between expatriate and indigenous workers, enabling Temaru's conservative opponents to exploit the discontent. He was compelled to defer the plan, compounding already acute financial problems. As a result, the government failed to present its provisional 2005 budget for approval, drawing criticism from the Standard and Poor's credit rating agency.

The recent ministerial defections have increased the chances of a motion of censure and the replacement of the government by a new coalition involving right-wing Gaullist and former President Gaston Flosse. Papeete's two French-language newspapers last week carried banner headlines speculating on a Vernaudeau-Flosse alliance, with Vernaudeau becoming president for the first time.

Vernaudeau has already declared his hand, saying the next step after the vote over the assembly speaker is winning the presidency. Schyle has indicated he will not immediately accept a motion of censure, arguing that the population "needs time to integrate with the change". However, two more cabinet ministers from Vernaudeau's party are also expected to submit their resignations from the government,

further isolating Temaru.

Simultaneously, Paris has intensified pressure on the government with the announcement over Easter that a visit by a French nuclear official would be indefinitely postponed due to the “current social-political” situation. The official was scheduled to arrive in Tahiti on April 24 to discuss the findings of a recent inquiry that strongly criticised France’s efforts to cover up the continuing health effects of its nuclear testing program.

The moves against Temaru fly in the face of the popular vote at two elections. In May 2004, Temaru’s coalition defeated Flosse, who lost office for the first time in 20 years. Just four months later, Temaru was removed as president. His single-vote majority was overturned when Flosse successfully connived with three “independent” politicians to form a new parliamentary grouping to support his party.

Temaru’s ousting triggered widespread popular unrest. His followers mounted the largest-ever protest march in Tahiti to demand the dissolution of the assembly and new elections. They 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.

The Chirac government in Paris declared it would do whatever was required to “maintain stability”. In response to the rising tide of anti-Flosse and pro-independence sentiment, 300 special riot police were dispatched to the territory to prevent the “dismemberment of the republic”.

The French Council of State overturned the election results for the Windward Islands on the basis of spurious allegations of voting irregularities by Flosse. In a by-election in February 2005, a grouping of six parties under Temaru’s leadership won 6,000 more votes than Flosse. The result was a decisive rebuff to the colonial authorities and demonstrated widespread opposition to Flosse and French rule as a whole.

Over the past year, however, there have been continuing efforts to destabilise the government and return an openly right-wing administration to office. French cabinet minister Francois Baroin targeted Temaru’s pro-independence remarks during a visit to Tahiti and New Zealand at the end of March. He said Temaru had “no mandate” to speak of independence, particularly during his trips overseas.

Baroin’s rebuke echoed earlier criticisms by French high commissioner Anne Boquet, who accused Temaru of using his presidential position to “engage in the business of casting discredit on France”. Boquet wrote an official letter reprimanding Temaru for his comments during a visit to the Cook Islands in early March. Temaru declared he did not know what “French Polynesia” was and wanted to be known as the president of Tahiti Nui.

During a visit to French Polynesia’s Austral Islands on March 24, Temaru escalated his rhetoric, stating that maintaining colonialism was “an impediment to the economic, social and cultural development of our land...[W]e must ask how we can protect ourselves. I do not think that this will be possible while remaining a community of the (French) State.” Boquet promptly responded, saying that independence was “not on the agenda.”

On the eve of Baroin’s arrival in Tahiti, Temaru pointedly paid a visit to memorials commemorating those who died in the French-Tahitian wars of 1844-47 and declared, “this land is Tahiti Nui. It became French through bloodshed and through might is right... This is the history of our land.”

While calling about independence for political purposes, Temaru has at the same time has been careful to leave the door open to France. At the end of his speech in the Austral Islands, he added the rider: “Independence doesn’t mean a rupture with France. Everything can be negotiated.” During his discussions with Baroin, he unexpectedly proposed a deal in line with agreements in the French colony of New Caledonia, which put off “independence” virtually indefinitely in return for limited political autonomy.

Temaru’s manoeuvres underscore the empty character of his demand for “independence”. The ruling elites in French Polynesia face the same dilemma as other tiny Pacific island states: even with formal independence, they all remain completely dependent—economically, politically and militarily—on the major powers, in most cases directly on their former colonial masters.

As far as the French government is concerned, however, Temaru’s posturing is an intolerable threat to France’s key strategic and economic assets in the Pacific and has to be ended.



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