

Power switching and renewal in French Polynesian politics

the importance of 2004

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Abstract

The year 2004 saw great upheavals in the political situation in Tahiti, and may prove to be a very important year in the history of French Polynesia as a whole. The May elections for the Territorial Assembly, and thus for the President of the territory, resulted for the first time in the victory of Oscar Temaru. A long-time challenger of the outgoing President Gaston Flosse, Temaru had suspended his programme of immediate independence in favour of an ideological breathing space of several years, with two aims: to break Gaston Flosse's autocratic grip on power, and to set up real and sustainable development processes. Oscar Temaru became President at the head of an unstable majority in May 2004 but lost power to Gaston Flosse in October 2004. He was re-elected, again with a fragile majority, in the February 2005 elections.

This article, based on the facts of 2004 and early 2005, reveals the metropolitan French government's lack of neutrality in the electoral process (notably by adopting a system intended to favour Gaston Flosse). It examines the relationship between politics and religion in French Polynesia; highlights cultural factors in French Polynesian politics, notes the emergence of young potential leaders, and thereby explains the reasons for the political rise and fall and rise again of Oscar Temaru.

Keywords

elections; French Polynesia; politics and religion; Tahiti.

Résumé

L'année politique 2004 à Tahiti a connu de grands bouleversements. Les élections territoriales du mois de mai, pour le renouvellement de l'Assemblée (qui investit le président du gouvernement) ont vu pour la première fois la victoire d'Oscar Temaru. Challenger de longue date de Gaston Flosse, Oscar Temaru a mis de côté son programme pour une indépendance immédiate, au profit d'une pause idéologique de quelques années visant principalement à rompre avec l'exercice autocratique du pouvoir de Gaston Flosse; également, à mettre en place un réel développement durable. A la tête d'une majorité fragile, Oscar Temaru n'exerce pourtant le pouvoir que trois mois, puisqu'il est renversé en octobre 2004.

Sa chute provoque de vives réactions non seulement à Tahiti, mais également en France. Le 15 novembre 2004, le Conseil d'État annule les élections aux îles du Vent (Tahiti et Moorea). De nouvelles élections partielles, tenues le 13 février 2005, donnent à nouveau une majorité fragile à Oscar Temaru, qui est réélu président de la Polynésie française le 3 mars 2005 et qui forme, le 7 mars 2005, un gouvernement de seize ministres.

Basé sur un rappel des faits de l'année 2004 et des premiers mois de l'année 2005, le présent article explique les raisons de l'ascension d'Oscar Temaru, puis de sa chute et finalement de sa ré-election. Il note le regain d'intérêt pour la politique, avec la formation de plusieurs partis et surtout l'émergence d'une nouvelle génération politique. Il insiste sur la non neutralité de l'Etat français dans le processus électoral (notamment par l'adoption d'un mode de scrutin visant à favoriser Gaston Flosse), et explique les liens entre politique et religion à Tahiti.

Mots clés

Tahiti; Polynésie française; élections; politique et religion.

IN SPITE OF 30 YEARS of nuclear testing,¹ French Polynesia has largely avoided the civil and political violence that in the past did not spare another territory under French authority, New Caledonia. In Tahiti, the struggle for independence moves peacefully, and in 2004 seemed even to have been shelved in favour of a moratorium of several years, aimed primarily at bringing to an end the power exercised by that most determined supporter of a permanent French presence, the Polynesian leader Gaston Flosse.

Tahiti's 2004 elections produced not just a simple switch of power from one party to another, but a series of twists and turns that no professional political analyst or observer could have predicted. In May, the president of the outgoing government, Gaston Flosse, was narrowly defeated by Oscar Temaru, leader of the independence movement. Less than four months later, Oscar Temaru's government was overturned when one of its members switched support to Flosse, allowing Flosse and his party to regain local executive power. The surprise subsequent annulment of the Windward Islands election, though, necessitated fresh elections in February 2005. Once again the ballot boxes delivered a reversal: Flosse was narrowly squeezed out and Temaru reinstated.

Such events, however unexpected, are mainly the result of the manoeuvring that reminds us how, in Oceania as elsewhere, political events are based on the art of the possible, the art of whatever works. We will try here to go beyond the overthrow and return of Gaston Flosse to describe and analyse the political events of Tahiti in 2004, in all their richness and complexity. To do this we must take into account some of the legal and institutional factors that affect political life and the electors' choice of a party. We will need also to look at more cultural factors, and particularly at the part played by religion in these political events.

The institutional and political framework

In French Polynesia, a vast ensemble of five archipelagos, institutional power is divided between three kinds of players: State, Territory and local governments (municipalities). The State provides the main framework, the structure that houses the two other powers, but the reality is that the Territory (or the powers that belong to it) presents itself and is represented every day as the State's partner, a counter-power to that of the State, not just its nursling.²

France annexed French Polynesia piecemeal in the nineteenth century³ but it was not until the years 1971 to 1972 that she created the local government structure of municipalities endowed with their own budget, each funded chiefly by the State but managed independently by the municipal councils. Some municipalities were in existence before 1971–1972, but the general increase in the number of local government bodies was clearly a politico-institutional manoeuvre whereby France hoped to break up the local power structure and to fragment the growing unity among those who were working towards political autonomy and the creation of a new entity, a territory with its own powers, directed by locally elected Polynesians.

Having created and extended local government, in 1977 France finally accepted the birth of a territory that was at first directed by a State representative and Polynesian politicians, but from 1984 totally managed by an autonomous Polynesian government. Since 1984, the President of the Territory has been elected by the majority of the Assembly representatives (originally known as councillors) who win seats during the territorial elections. The President and his government are responsible to the Assembly.

Over the past thirty years and many revisions of the statutory autonomy of French Polynesia, its territorial powers have continued to extend.⁴ Today, the Territory is competent in areas such as fisheries, agriculture, education and transport, while the State continues to control the police, the army, justice, money, emigration, tertiary education and international relations (although in certain areas, such as international relations within the Pacific region, the State may delegate its powers to the Territory).

A political life structured by party politics and punctuated by elections is a new thing in French Polynesia.⁵ The first elections were organised in 1945 to elect the members of the Territorial Assembly created in that year. The people of Tahiti and the other islands had only a matter of a few years in which to learn how to participate in public affairs, in democracy. They had never before had occasion to take part in elections, other than for those for their district chiefs, who were essentially registrars (of births, deaths and marriages).

Political parties were created, and although some may have been dominated by the 'leadership' phenomenon, in which personality is more important than ideology, political life became structured by a simple ideological rift. On the one

side stood the conservatives, hostile to any form of autonomy and advocates of total absorption into France; on the other side, both the autonomists favouring a territorial government in the bosom of the French Republic and independentists (*les indépendantistes*, separatists; lit. those pro-independence) advocating a total rupture with France. During the nuclear testing period, the conservatives supported France's nuclear policies, while some autonomists became more radical, moving towards supporting independence. However, the cleavage between the two sides preceded, and has outlived the cessation of, nuclear testing.

Today, all inhabitants of French Polynesia accept the idea of at least internal autonomy, but the gulf between autonomists and independentists largely still exists, even if 2004 has seen it sidelined in favour of another dividing line. On the one side, we have the supporters of a man, Gaston Flosse, formerly an opponent of autonomy then coming around to this cause in 1980, but always hostile to independence. On the other side, the previous autonomists and independentists joined forces in 2004, putting aside their differences about the progress towards independence to fight for democratic reform and the defeat of the autocratic government of Gaston Flosse.

An institutional system tailored by and for Gaston Flosse

Gaston Flosse, a mixed-race Polynesian from Mangareva in the Gambier Islands, held the office of Vice-President of the Territorial Government between 1982 and 1984, and twice held the office of President, from 1984 to 1987, and from 1991 to 2004. In 1986, as a personal friend of the (then) French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, he became a member of Chirac's national government, with the vice-ministerial title of Secretary of State for Pacific Island Affairs. He used his personal and political connections with Jacques Chirac—whose party⁶ has held the legislative majority in France from 1986 to 1988, from 1993 to 1997 and from 2002 to the present time—to obtain institutional advantages from the State. On the financial side, he could flaunt the argument that it was thanks to that friendship that the Territory received very large subventions from the State, although, as Guy Sem has shown (2000:169–74), such assistance was not strictly tied to the political colour of any majority in power in Paris.

In effect, whatever the reasons for such injections of funds—formerly linked in part to nuclear testing and then to post-nuclear redevelopment—the funds allowed the ‘modernisation’ of the local economy and the development of such infrastructure elements as ports, airports and administrative buildings. These investments in public works, although not very productive in the long term, produced quick growth and created the impression that thanks to France and her old friend Gaston Flosse, the money flows into Tahiti. This impression has ensured that Flosse has a large pool of Polynesian voters in the local bourgeoisie as well as in the less affluent areas, particularly in distant archipelagos unfamiliar with the disadvantages of urban living.

Institutionally, Gaston Flosse has continued to obtain greater powers from the French parliament.⁷ During the revision of the statute in 1996, this parliament pushed through an amendment allowing the Territory to provide direct financial aid to French Polynesian municipalities.⁸ This was a perversion of democracy, based on power plays among the State, the Territory and local governments. From 1996, Gaston Flosse and his government acted on a policy of aiding municipalities that supported his party, the *Taboeraa Huiraatira*, and neglecting municipalities supported by opposition parties. Some mayors therefore changed their allegiance and joined the *Taboeraa Huiraatira*, and during the 2001 local government elections, many electors tended to withdraw support from opposition candidates, believing that such candidates, if elected, would not be able to obtain funding from the *Taboeraa Huiraatira* government.

Overall, this 1996 provision had important, even drastic, consequences. It encouraged a well-established tendency of French Polynesian political life, in which the elector foresees and ensures the victory of a party by joining it if it seems the strongest. Electors in Tahiti resemble punters at horse races: they bet on the horse they think will win, not on the horse they prefer. This raises the question of how governments can be beaten when they have power not only over the financial resources of the Territory but also, indirectly, over the local government that shares the daily life of its inhabitants—especially because the French government and Gaston Flosse have always refused to extend to French Polynesia the principle that the opposition must be represented in municipal councils.

The 1996 amendment not only affected the financing of local government; it also put a brake on the formation of new groups within the autonomist movement, and favoured the *Taboeraa Huiraatira*. Since 1970, mayors have often created their own lists for Territorial Assembly elections, hoping for the support of their own municipalities.⁹ If successful, they would put their weight towards forming a territorial majority, from which they would try to obtain funding for their municipality. Before 1996, such funding was granted in the form of public works or equipment, or financial support for associations and so on, but not in the form of direct subventions. But from 1996, the mayors wanting to increase their sources of direct funding realised that in Territorial Assembly elections it would be better to join the *Taboeraa Huiraatira* lists of Gaston Flosse than to risk all by presenting their own lists. Usually, the first 10 candidates on the Windward Islands list of the *Taboeraa Huiraatira* would become territorial government ministers, and each minister would be replaced in the Territorial Assembly by the next candidate on their list. A mayor who presents an individual list cannot be sure of being elected to the Territorial Assembly, and if elected, has even less chance of both a ministerial appointment (a position that requires a certain knowledge) and replacement in the Territorial Assembly by another candidate in the same list.

Under the system of clientship that prevailed in the politically pluralist years of the 1970s and 1980s, the electors of each municipality would give their mayors in the Territorial Assembly total discretion in the choice of alliances. Usually these alliances were with autonomist groupings under the *Taboeraa Huiraatira* umbrella. This is important; it shows that the twists and turns of alliance, which in 2004 first helped then harmed Oscar Temaru, are nothing new in French Polynesia. Simply, they may in earlier times have had their own logic, taking into account that the fragmentation of political bodies necessitates last minute alliances. Today, however, an almost totally bipolarised political situation makes such last-minute jumps from one party to another more difficult to justify.

Looking back, we see that at the end of the 1980s almost every municipality was run by one party or the other. Fifteen years later, during the territorial elections of May 2004, 42 of the 48 municipalities in French Polynesia were led by a *Taboeraa Huiraatira* mayor, regardless of whether these

mayors were elected as *Taboeraa Huiraatira* supporters, or had joined the majority *Taboeraa Huiraatira* after the election. The only municipalities that had resisted this trend were those of Faaa, Arue, Mahina, Uturoa, Nuku Hiva and Tubuai

In 2004, the French national assembly gave Gaston Flosse some additional help in slicing up his opponents.¹⁰ It voted a new statute for French Polynesia, giving enlarged powers to the Territory¹¹—or rather, to the President of French Polynesia, who became all-powerful in relation to his ministers and the members of his administration. This presidential status was an obvious personal gift from the UMP to Gaston Flosse, to thank him for his faithfulness to President Chirac and the maintenance of a French presence in the Pacific (as well as for his ability to pamper the UMP politicians visiting Tahiti).

Of all the measures adopted in the new statute, the least democratic was the introduction of a bonus system (*une prime majoritaire*), which adds one-third of the Assembly seats to the seats already won by the party with the highest vote in each of the electoral districts of French Polynesia (of which at the time there were six). The official explanation was that in situations where the majority was fragile, the one-third bonus would increase political stability by reducing the likelihood of majority power loss due to individuals being tempted to switch political allegiance. In fact, however, it produced exactly the opposite effect.

Reasons for the defeat of Gaston Flosse

In the May 2004 Territorial Assembly elections, thirty-seven of the fifty-seven available seats were in the Windward Islands electorate comprising Tahiti and Moorea, while twenty went to the other, less populous, islands. With the new electoral system, Gaston Flosse's *Taboeraa Huiraatira* was almost sure of obtaining between forty and forty-four seats, even should his opponents gain a total of more votes.

But when the ballot boxes spoke, they overturned all the prophecies. On 23 May 2004, seventeen of the twenty seats in the outlying islands went to the *Taboeraa Huiraatira*, but in Tahiti and Moorea, the opposition parties profited from the bonus.

The short-lived victory went to the *Union Pour La Démocratie* (UPLD)¹²—a coalition of groups that had formed around the independentist party *Tavini Huiraatira* and its leader Oscar Temaru—who had temporarily set aside the

fight for independence in an effort to defeat Gaston Flosse. In the Windward Islands, it led by 391 votes, thus obtaining 11 seats plus the 13 from the bonus, a total of 24 seats. By adding the two UPLD seats won in the other islands, and the seats of the three autonomists who opposed both Gaston Flosse and independence,¹³ the opposition obtained 29 seats, whereas Flosse's *Taboeraa Huiraatira* obtained only 28.

This was a veritable political earthquake in Tahiti. What had happened? What could explain this spectacular upset?

Clearly, some reasons are economic. In the end, Gaston Flosse was injured by corruption allegations, never proved in court, but persisting in public opinion and even in some elements of the media. He is a rich businessman and a rich politician, whose image is that of someone who has profited financially from his power. Such behaviour is particularly unpopular in a country where a Polynesian egalitarianism (see Saura 2004a:97), based on very old cultural traditions (Robineau 1985), requires that leaders (or chiefs) share with their people the advantages that they derive from their position and functions.

His liking for money and his ability to obtain State funding to feed into the French Polynesia budget are linked with an increasing tendency to squander public funds. Thus, in the years preceding 2004, he built a sumptuous presidential palace to house his offices in the capital, Papeete, undertook ostentatious upgrades of the waterfronts of Papeete and of Uturoa in the Leeward Islands, and transformed the atoll of Tupai, also in the Leeward Islands, into a prestigious presidential residence, complete with wharf, airport and related buildings, for himself and for his VIP guests.

At the same time, he continued to support liberal political economics and refused to impose income tax. One might well ask why he has so many Polynesian supporters when French Polynesia has such great social and economic inequalities.¹⁴ In fact Gaston Flosse succeeded in creating an image of himself as the only rampart against independence, which he presents as the synonym for absolute misery. Many Polynesians therefore prefer to remain French, and to continue a life of relative economic ease (because in spite of the enormous inequalities, education, health and some other services are provided almost free of charge) rather than to risk sinking into a poverty that Flosse has made more probable by creating an economy and infrastructure too costly for a small independent state to operate.

The man's political genius consists of lulling the electors with economic policies designed for short-term growth, not long-term development. But he made a double error: the confusion of growth with development, and the confusion of adherence to France with adherence to the *Taboeraa Huiiraatira*. (It would theoretically be possible to stay French and vote for parties other than that of Gaston Flosse, provided that such parties still existed. As we have seen, everything possible has been done over the years to ensure that such parties disappear.)

Politics provide the second reason for the victory of Oscar Temaru and his allies. The monopolistic and autocratic tendencies of the Flosse system so greatly endangered democracy in French Polynesia that they finally caused a reaction. We may pass over the nepotism of his regime, demonstrated by the fact that Edouard Fritch, the Vice-President and Flosse's nominated successor, is Flosse's long-time son-in-law. Prominent among the factors that disquieted the electors was the creation of the bonus system. Others included the policy of undertaking enormous roadworks, which entailed the expropriation and destruction of dozens, even hundreds, of properties and houses. When the 2004 statute gave the Territory priority to acquire land that was up for sale, ordinary Polynesians understood the provision as another way of excluding and cheating them, of acquiring their land and giving it to foreign finance companies.

But in public opinion, the greatest threat against democracy was the creation over recent years of the GIP, a body comprising several hundred 'musclemen', employed outside the standard government recruitment processes, and infinitely biddable.¹⁵ Even though detailed to help with cyclone and landslide relief, they gave the impression of being Gaston Flosse's private army or militia, very impressive but threatening rather than reassuring.¹⁶

For its part, the independentist party *Tavini Huiiraatira* conducted a perfect campaign, and by melting into the UPLD in 2004 attracted both trade union leaders and former politicians. Temporarily setting aside the question of independence in favour of a new political and socio-economic deal, with the battle cry of '*Tani!* (Let's have change)', Oscar Temaru, mayor of Faaa since 1983 and having the reputation of being a good family man, managed to convince the electors.

On 14 June 2004, Oscar Temaru became president of the territorial government at the head of a so-called 'pluralist majority' (*une majorité plurielle*) short by one seat. His nine-member government, kept small to reduce budget expenditure, reflected all shades of political opinion in the majority. When elected, Oscar Temaru himself recognised the difficulties inherent in allying several parties, but nobody expected a defection to come so soon, or that the defector would be from one of Temaru's own UPLD list, a member of the *Tavini Huiraatira*.

The matter of the cross in the Assembly

In the beginning, the 'pluralist majority' was reinforced by the defection of two councillors from the *Taboeraa Huiraatira*.¹⁷ However, evidence of discontent in the UPLD ranks was quickly noted and given increasing publicity by the media. Two UPLD representatives were prominent: Hiro Tefaarere and Noa Tetuanui, both members of the *Tavini Huiraatira*. Hiro Tefaarere was clearly disappointed by not having been chosen as President of the Territorial Assembly, a post that went to Antony (Tony) Géros, a long-time supporter of Oscar Temaru. The second, Noa Tetuanui, had expected to become Minister of Agriculture,¹⁸ but lost out to a civil appointee, Keitapu Maamaatuaiahutapu.¹⁹

These two malcontents, joined by trade unionist Ronald Terorotua and by one of the two former *Taboeraa Huiraatira* members who had switched to the 'pluralist majority' in June 2004, very quickly formed a pressure group that threatened to shatter that majority. Disappointed by the slowness of the process of change, they charged the Temaru government with employing too many ministerial staff members (just as Gaston Flosse's ministers had); with not being efficient; and with not knowing how to manage the economy.

To be fair, we must recognise that the ministers and the president, who were all new to such positions, did take time to learn their way around the intricacies of their portfolios. But everyone was watching, and many opposition members were waiting for the first mistakes that would enable them to agitate for the return of Gaston Flosse to restore efficiency and 'save' the economy.

Businesses were worried by the prospect of having to contribute to the social reforms intended by the Temaru government.²⁰ The metropolitan French government boycotted the new leaders of their Overseas Territory (now Country). The High Commissioner refused to appear at official functions

with Oscar Temaru, who was not received by any of the highest State authorities during his visits to Paris, whereas all doors were open to Gaston Flosse. Obviously, in spite of the popular support of ordinary Polynesians and their pride in their ordinary man's victory over the rich and powerful, Oscar Temaru was quickly in difficulties.

The official reason for the majority's defeat was the 'Assembly cross affair', which provoked UPLD councillor Noa Tetuanui to switch his support to the *Taboeraa Huiiraatira* opposition. Tetuanui²¹ could not accept the unilateral decision taken on 3 June 2004 by the new Assembly President, Tony Géros, to place a crucifix in the Assembly hemicycle. Here we should remember two things: that most French Polynesians openly claim adherence to the Christian faith, and that the Christian cross is also the emblem of the independendist party *Tavini Huiiraatira*, of which Tony Géros is a long-term active member.

Over the weeks, arguments were developed not only by the opposition but also in and by the majority. As the crucifix is a Roman Catholic symbol, Tony Géros agreed to its replacement by a simple cross, without the Christ figure, but it took months for him to accept that it should be withdrawn altogether because of the growing risk of causing the majority to explode. On 17 September 2004, President Oscar Temaru finally removed the cross from the wall of the Assembly chamber, but it was too late. Three weeks later, his government was overthrown (cf. *La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 18 Sep. 2004:23).

But was opposition to a cross in the Assembly the real reason why Noa Tetuanui switched his support to Gaston Flosse? Some people have been quick to talk about corruption, but whatever the reason, Noa Tetuanui's stiff-necked opposition to having the cross in the chamber—although he does not seem to have been disturbed by having a cross as emblem for his previous party, the *Tavini Huiiraatira*—raises the question of what dividing lines exist or might exist between religion and politics in French Polynesia.²²

In a country that has been Christian for 200 years, one might expect that the cross would offend nobody, except perhaps the representative of the State, because the French Republic has no official religion.²³ However, most denominations publicly stated their opposition to having the cross in a public building. Their respective positions are stated below.

Roman Catholic authorities were the only ones not to express opposition to the cross. Several days after Tony Géros took the initiative, the Archbishop of Papeete, Mgr Hubert Coppenrath, wrote that he saw 'neither provocation nor aggression [in the decision] . . . I like this gesture . . . Tahiti does not identify itself with a finicky and narrow secularity. Within it, people can proclaim their religious faith willingly and without shame . . . and at the same time, within it, everyone is tolerant'.²⁴

On the other side, from June 2004, the Protestant leaders made known their opposition to the crucifix in the Assembly, even though the crucifix was quickly replaced by the simple cross.²⁵ Their arguments were based sometimes on the crucifix as a Roman Catholic symbol, and sometimes on the principle of political secularism, although it is difficult not to suspect, in spite of declarations made by some Protestant leaders, that their opposition was intended as a rampart against the progress made by the Roman Catholic church over the past twenty years. Even before the August 2004 synod, which officially confirmed his stance, Taarii Maraea, the President of the *Église protestante maohi*, demanded in the name of respect for freedom of conscience that the cross be taken down: 'From that liberty, accorded to each individual, flows religious freedom. No religion, even the religion of a majority, can give itself privileges and impose itself on others . . . Even if the Protestant faith had its own symbol we would react in the same way' (*La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 8 July 2004:22).

The leaders of the other churches tended to wait for the withdrawal of the cross before saying that they had never favoured its presence in the Assembly. In September 2004 Jean Tefan, a highly-placed official of the Mormon Church in Tahiti, explained: 'In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, you can see that we do not have crosses in our buildings, because we believe in a risen Christ, not in a Christ who is dead . . . As far as the President of the Assembly was concerned we believed that, as the head of that institution, he had the right to install the cross in the Assembly, even though we were rather sorry that he didn't consult the members beforehand . . . Now, however, because the presence of the cross has caused dissent in the Assembly, I think it a good thing that it has been withdrawn'. The Seventh-Day Adventist president, Marama Tuariihonia, also approved of its withdrawal: 'The

Assembly is the house of the people . . . The cross is a Roman Catholic symbol and nobody has the right to impose it on others' (both quotations from *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* 18 Sep. 2004:11).

Overall, the positions taken by religious leaders in regard to Church–State relations are surprising. Here we have the Protestants waving the flag of secularism, which signifies the supremacy of the State and of its right to regulate the actions of the Church, and the position of religious symbols in public life. The unanimous non-Catholic condemnation of the cross in the Assembly cannot be understood simply as the manifestation of the ideals of Church–State separation. It can be understood only by taking into account both the intense competition between denominations, and the present dynamism of the Roman Catholic Church, which is most closely identified with the cross. Both Tony Géros and Oscar Temaru are active Catholics, even if ideologically their politics and policies are more those of the *Église protestante maohi*, whose main leaders have for many years supported the ideal of independence.

The overthrow of Oscar Temaru

Protestant and clearly disappointed at missing out on a ministerial position, Noa Tetuanui suddenly denounced the mixture of politics and religion that he saw in the minds of certain leaders of the UPLD and the *Tavini Huiraatira*. These leaders, he felt, were old-fashioned, superstitious, engaged in some sort of moral crusade against the past policies of a demonised Gaston Flosse, while they themselves embodied all the virtues and took refuge behind the cross. His views are not totally groundless, though we might wonder why he took so long to see the spiritual, even Messianic, dimensions of Temaru's struggle, which echoes, fifty years later, that of Pouvanaa a Oopa (see Saura 2001).

So Noa Tetuanui finally left the 'pluralist majority', which also lost the two *Taboeraa Huiraatira* politicians who, having joined it in June 2004, switched back to Gaston Flosse when they saw the fragility of the majority. Noa Tetuanui added his voice to those of the Flosse supporters when they voted the censure motion against Oscar Temaru on 9 October 2004, thus causing Gaston Flosse's return to power.

Massive popular support for Temaru

Oscar Temaru's reaction to his removal had both political and religious dimensions. Politically, he and his partisans organised a massive protest march that converged on Papeete on 16 October 2004. More than 20,000 people took part, an enormous participation rate for Tahiti's population of about 150,000. They expressed their disgust at political manoeuvres such as Noa Tetuanui's switch to Gaston Flosse and demanded the return of Oscar Temaru to government for the five-year term of his election. At the same time a petition demanded the dissolution of the Assembly and new elections to end the political instability inherent in a majority that could change from one day to the next with the defection of one or other of the representatives. This petition was signed by more than 40,000 electors throughout French Polynesia.

As well, from 25 to 28 October 2004, the ousted President, the members of his government and hundreds of his supporters held a 'spiritual fast' in the Presidential building. Refusing to leave, they all prayed that God would guide the metropolitan French judges and other officials who had the power to decide whether new elections should be held (cf. *La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 27 Oct. 2004:35). This fast in the Presidential building provides evidence of a strong spiritual, but not uniquely Christian, element, with Oscar Temaru repeatedly referring to both Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi.

The fast reveals also the existence of different points of reference and kinds of behaviour and even different political cultures in Tahitian political life. Nicole Bouteau and Philippe Schyle, both allies of the UPLD, had in June 2004 helped Oscar Temaru create the 'pluralist majority', but had not often attended *Tavini Huiraa* meetings. They freely acknowledged that fasting and prayers were not their preferred mode of action. For Nicole Bouteau [the position was clear]: 'Some have chosen to fast . . . that doesn't bother me, I respect what Oscar Temaru says, that the Polynesians are profound believers, so we'll follow the decisions taken today . . . [However] I have said that we should lobby outside French Polynesia . . . we must get the debate into metropolitan France and into the European Parliament. We must take action. Fasting is all very well, but me, I want action'. Philippe Schyle stated: '[Fasting] is a strategy that we support, even though I personally found the idea very surprising. It's not something to which our political culture has accustomed us, but I support it

because it responds to our need for peaceful development . . . I'll fast here, rather than dine in Paris' (both quotations from *La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 26 Oct. 2004:20).

Demands for dissolution and new elections

While, therefore, some fasted in Tahiti, others went to Paris and to the European Commission in Brussels to explain the local situation to European journalists and to get support from political parties and parliamentarians. There was a real risk of social and political explosion in Tahiti, because some of Oscar Temaru's supporters could not accept the theft of their May 2004 victory.

They decided not to quit the presidential palace, symbol of the profligate Flosse era, but now the house of the people, which in truth Oscar Temaru had opened to them the day after his election, for them to visit and see with their own eyes its wastefulness and decadence. Several hundred supporters worked in shifts, eating and sleeping there, guarding their leader Oscar Temaru, who claimed to be the 'legitimate president', as distinct from Gaston Flosse, who was the 'legal president'. French soldiers had already been sent to Tahiti, and there were very grave fears that there would be violent popular reactions if the State ordered them to evacuate the presidential buildings by force. Everyone remembers the 1987 riots in which part of Papeete was sacked and burned by hooligans with political crisis as pretext, or the burning of the airport at Faaa in 1996 after nuclear testing had started again. As well, at the end of October 2004, Oscar Temaru supporters took over some of the Territory's administrative buildings, and paralysed the territorial public service by disabling the central computer server.

Papeete had reached crisis point.

In France, the Socialist Party, principal opponent of Jacques Chirac's UMP party, totally supported calls for the dissolution of the Assembly, followed by fresh elections. On the other side, Brigitte Girardin, member of the UMP and Minister for Overseas, went to extraordinary lengths to support Gaston Flosse; she claimed that all was well in Tahiti, that the overthrow of Oscar Temaru was simply part of the democratic process, and that therefore there would be no question of dissolving the Assembly.

If the solution was not to be political, it could be judicial. On 15 November 2004, the State Council found a way to the annulment of the elections in the Windward Islands of Tahiti and Moorea. This had been requested in May 2004 by Gaston Flosse, who considered that his party had not had radio and television time equal to that granted to his adversaries, and that some voting places had been decorated in the colours of their parties. The pretext for annulling the elections was that the voting booth curtains in the town hall of Mahina in Tahiti were in the colours of the UPLD, the party of the mayor, Émile Vernaudon.

This decision deserves closer examination, because it reveals a conflict between Polynesian customs and French law. The local tradition, since the 1950s, has been for electors to dress in the colours of their party, but year after year, the courts have restrained them from putting up signs of political allegiance, which are forbidden by French law. In the islands of French Polynesia, where everyone knows everyone else's religious and political affiliation, such practices bother nobody, but the administrative judges clearly did not give any weight to the specificities of Polynesian life.

In the particular case of the annulment of the May 2004 elections, nobody could seriously think that the judges really believed that the colours of the Mahina booths would have influenced the electors. On the other hand it is extremely likely that the judges opened the door to a resolution of the Tahitian crisis because the political leaders in Paris refused to do so. The President, Jacques Chirac, and the Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, remained silent while Brigitte Girardin, Minister for Overseas, supported Gaston Flosse.

To be sure, annulling the Windward Islands elections concerned only thirty-seven of the fifty-seven seats, but this election alone, fixed for 13 February 2005, could allow Oscar Temaru and his allies to win again. In the other electorates, where the *Tahoeraa Huiraatira* currently holds the majority, very complex judicial considerations make it impossible for any eventual elections to be held before 2006.

Following this legal decision and despite Temaru's order to his supporters to leave the presidential buildings and to stop blocking administrative services, some of the protesters continued to occupy the presidential palace. They spent their Christmas and New Year there, 'keeping the house warm', in the fervent hope of the return of their 'legitimate president', Oscar Temaru.

Gaston Flosse's party had begun to split during the 2004 crisis. Beatrice Vernaudon, the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira* deputy in the metropolitan French Assembly, was a very early supporter of dissolution in order to clarify the situation and reduce the risks of social and political explosion. She went so far as to retire from the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira*, and openly to encourage the partisans of the 'third way', Nicole Bouteau and Philippe Schyle. Another *Taboeraa Huiraaatira* dissident and previously one of Gaston Flosse's most faithful adherents, Reynald Temarii, was so disappointed by Flosse's rigidity and refusal to delegate power to younger *Taboeraa Huiraaatira* members that he formed another autonomist, anti-independence party, *Porinetia Ora*.

The defeat of Gaston Flosse and the rise and fall of the independentist leader Oscar Temaru resulted in a renewed public interest in politics. Of cultural importance, too, is the emergence of the new leader, Nicole Bouteau. A clear-sighted, poised and determined young woman of thirty-five, she has real charisma in the media, and has used her skills and personality to rise quickly into the ranks of the most important figures of Tahitian political life. Born in France of a French father and Tahitian mother, Nicole Bouteau does not speak Tahitian. Her success amongst young people, and even beyond them, may signify the passing of the era in which political success depended above all on the degree to which the aspirant had mastered the art of Tahitian oratory. From now on, it is less important to speak well than it is to speak the truth. For the time being, Nicole Bouteau is an exception in local political life, but she may be the first of a series of men and women who will form a new political generation.

The two small Bouteau and Schyle autonomist parties had weighed so heavily in the balance of power and in the formation of the 'pluralist majority' in May 2004 that one year later, their existence encouraged the formation of other small parties dreaming of being able to arbitrate between the big parties. In the end, while the political situation remained polarised between Gaston Flosse's allies and opponents, new political groupings became so numerous that any future alliance became possible.

During its campaign for the February 2005 territorial elections, therefore, the UPLD had to confront not only the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira* but also others such as Philippe Schyle's *Fetia Api* and Nicole Bouteau's *No oe e te nuna*, which had formed the 'pluralist majority' with the UPLD in 2004, but in 2005 amalgamated

into one autonomist, anti-independence party, the *Alliance pour une démocratie nouvelle* (ADN). As the bonus system would be maintained, this dispersal of opponents could have favoured the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira*. At the same time, some people were tired of the occupation of buildings, and the road and administrative blockages by activists seeking the dissolution of parliament. This also could have worked against Oscar Temaru's return to power.

Oscar Temaru returns to power

However, the new 13 February elections again gave a fragile majority to Oscar Temaru. Votes for his UPLD rose by more than 6000, with majorities in nine of the thirteen municipalities of Tahiti and Moorea. With 46.9% of the vote, Temaru obtained twelve seats, plus the bonus of thirteen seats, while the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira* of Gaston Flosse, with 40% of the vote, obtained ten. Nicole Bouteau's centrist alliance ADN did poorly, obtaining only 10.5% of the vote, scarcely two seats. Adding together the Windward Islands seats from the February 2005 elections, and those of May 2004 elections in the other electorates, we have a total of 28 for the UPLD, 27 for the *Taboeraa Huiraaatira*, and 2 for the ADN.

On 3 March 2005, Oscar Temaru was finally re-elected President of French Polynesia, at the head of a frail majority of 29 seats—the 29th because one of Gaston Flosse's party switched to the new majority. Choosing to remain faithful to those who had supported him, and withstanding demands for a government that included opposition members, on 7 March Oscar Temaru appointed a cabinet of sixteen ministers, all affiliated with the UPLD.

In 2005, the January and February electoral campaign and the first weeks of the Temaru government have confirmed that the conservatives who hold power in France—particularly Chirac and Girardin—are suspicious of Oscar Temaru. Conversely, these elections and their sequels have confirmed the support of the independent anglophone countries of the region. Several days after the elections, on 9 February 2005, three organisations—the Pacific Council of Churches, the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre and the World Council of Churches—issued a joint official press release in which they denounced attempts by Gaston Flosse and his supporters to frighten voters into opposing Oscar Temaru because he was an independentist, who would lead the country backwards into misery. The press release expressed the hope

that the *maohi* people would see through this campaign of denigration, and would take into account the existence of another world in the rest of Oceania, a poorer world but a free one (*La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 10 Feb. 2005:22).

On the other side, as soon as Oscar Temaru was re-elected, the Paris press echoed Chirac's description of Oscar Temaru as a visionary mystic, and Brigitte Girardin's view of him as a 'notorious incompetent'.²⁶ Neither position has been officially and formally denied.

At the end of March, the new President received an official ministerial delegation from New Zealand. The two-day visit, which was led by Phil Goff, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, provided opportunities for Oscar Temaru to press for a strengthening of ties between the two Polynesian countries, and to highlight his own ties: 'New Zealand is my adopted country. My parents died and are buried there' (*La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 31 March 2005:22).

It is clear that by again choosing to elect Oscar Temaru, the people of French Polynesia have chosen also an open, Oceanian-style political leader. His aim is to prepare French Polynesia's future, not only by maintaining the best possible relations with France, but also by renewing ties with the big Pacific family. The future will tell whether Oscar Temaru and his team can maintain a successful course towards a double horizon, or whether this horizon is a mirage.

Notes

The original French version of this paper is available in the online version of the *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 28(1) 2005, at http://maya.usp.ac.fj/editorial/jps_new

¹ Use of Moruroa and Fangataufa as nuclear test sites continued from 1966 to 1996.

² For discussion of the duality of State-Territory relations see Al Wardi (1998).

³ For example, the Marquesas in 1842, Tahiti in 1880, the Leeward Islands in 1888.

⁴ Obviously, for the independentists the remaining powers of the State are still too numerous. On this subject, see Temaru (1988).

⁵ For a summary of political life from 1945 to 1982, see Danielsson (1983).

⁶ Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) which incorporates the earlier Rassemblement pour la République (RPR).

- ⁷ There are, however, areas in which powers have been reduced. Sem (2000:88) notes that the official use of the languages of French Polynesia was dropped in the 1996 statutory revision.
- ⁸ This amendment was inserted in Article 96 of the statute.
- ⁹ Elections in French Polynesia are by proportional representation; candidates group themselves into lists and the greatest number of seats goes to the lists that win the highest proportion of the total vote.
- ¹⁰ In Tahiti, Alex du Prel, founder and director of the monthly *Tahiti Pacifique*, has unceasingly and courageously denounced the increasing powers of Flosse, supported by his allies in the Chirac party in France. He also published Jean-Marc Regnault's *Tau'i* (2004), a synthesis of the events of 2004 and their historical roots.
- ¹¹ Henceforth to be called an Overseas Country.
- ¹² UPLD, Union for Democracy.
- ¹³ Each was elected from her or his own list: Chantale Tahiaata from an Austral Islands list; and in the Windward Islands, Philippe Schyle from the *Fetia Api* party and Nicole Bouteau from the party *No oe e te nunaa*.
- ¹⁴ In an attempt to explain his May 23 defeat, Gaston Flosse said, 'Many Polynesians thought that we put too much emphasis on economic development and not enough on sharing' (*La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 23 Dec. 2004:29).
- ¹⁵ GIP, *Groupement d'Intervention de la Présidence* (President's Intervention Group).
- ¹⁶ At the end of 2004 a GIP employee told the media and law courts that several years previously he had taken part in the assassination of Jean-Pascal Couraud, a journalist who had opposed Gaston Flosse. At the time his death was described as suicide, but this information has resulted in the establishment of a new judicial inquiry into the matter.
- ¹⁷ The Marquesan Islands representative Jean-Alain Frébault, mayor of Hiva Oa, and the Tuamotu representative Temaui Foster, mayor of Hao.
- ¹⁸ Hiro Tefaarere might have forgotten to perform his own self-criticism, but explained very clearly that Noa Tetuanui's discontent arose 'from the fact that Oscar Temaru had not made him a minister' (*La Dépêche de Tahiti*, 3 Nov. 2004:28).
- ¹⁹ A lecturer at the University of French Polynesia and formerly a lecturer at the University of the South Pacific in Suva.
- ²⁰ These included a minimal monthly wage, and an allowance for mothers of disadvantaged families.
- ²¹ For a while supported by Hiro Tefaarere and Ronald Terorotua, who finally rejoined the UPLD.
- ²² On this general theme, see Saura (1993) and Saura (1998).

- ²³ In fact, at the end of June 2004, the High Commissioner for French Polynesia, Michel Mathieu, representing the State, requested the State Council to have this religious symbol withdrawn out of respect for the principle of secularism.
- ²⁴ Weekly diocese communiqué, reprinted in *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti*, 11 June 2004:5.
- ²⁵ The *Église protestante maohi*, until August 2004 the *Église évangélique en Polynésie française*, has for many years been the numerically largest and most powerful denomination in French Polynesia, although its position is now being challenged by the Roman Catholic Church.
- ²⁶ For Chirac's comment, *Le Canard enchaîné*, 17 March 2005; see also the site www.aaapi.com. Girardin is reported by the weekly magazine *Le point*, (no. 1697), 24 March 2005.
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