

# Tahiti: Temaru's support for independence upsets Paris

Tuesday 22 August 2006, by [DIXON Norm](#) (Date first published: 23 August 2006).

**Since Oscar Temaru was elected president of Tahiti Nui (French Polynesia) in June 2004, he has infuriated the Pacific country's colonial masters in Paris. The furore over Temaru's July 28 leaking of a letter confirming that the French government has systematically covered up the link between its atmospheric nuclear tests in the Pacific and Tahiti's high cancer rates is just the latest confrontation. It is Temaru's unstinting support for Tahiti's eventual independence that has Paris searching for ways to defeat him.**

The French government has refused to accept Temaru's shock 2004 victory over the unquestioningly pro-French Gaston Flosse, which abruptly ended his 20-year reign. However, Temaru's new Union for Democracy (UPLD) coalition government, which included several parties that support "autonomy" rather than full independence, did not call for a break with Paris. Rather, it called for taui (change).

According to Pacific scholar Lorenz Gonschor, writing in the Spring 2006 edition of the Contemporary Pacific, taui "implied a new cultural orientation, away from the French influence and back to the country's Maohi (indigenous Polynesian) roots, as well as toward a more pan-Pacific perspective". This new attitude was on display in August 2004 when Temaru attended the Pacific Islands Forum in Apia, Samoa, at which Tahiti was granted observer status.

However, while his coalition government took a cautious approach on the question of Tahiti's ties to Paris, Temaru personally continued his campaign for eventual independence. In his capacity as leader of the pro-independence Tavini Huiraatira (Polynesian Liberation Front), rather than as French Polynesia's president, in August 2004 Temaru demanded that Tahiti be reinscribed on the United Nation's list of non-self-governing territories. Temaru also proposed that, following a period of autonomy, Tahiti's people be allowed to vote in a referendum on independence - a process similar to that taking place in Kanaky (New Caledonia).

France and its proxies in Tahiti moved immediately to overthrow Temaru. The UPLD coalition government majority came under sustained attack in the fractious French Polynesia Assembly (Tahiti's parliament), with individual MPs being lured from the majority to the pro-French opposition. After a number of MPs chopped and changed between the parliamentary blocs several times, Temaru's government finally lost its majority on September 24, 2004. On October 9, by 29 votes to 28, the assembly passed a "motion of censure" that ended Temaru's presidency. 'Legal coup'

Temaru demanded that France dissolve the assembly and call a new election so that the clear majority won by the UPLD coalition at the polls five months earlier could be restored. The right-wing government of French President Jacques Chirac refused. On October 16, more than 22,000 people mobilised in the capital Papeete in support of Temaru's call for a new election. A petition signed by 43,000 people was also presented.

On October 22, Flosse was “unanimously” elected president by the French Polynesia Assembly after the assembly building was occupied by the Groupement d’Intervention de la Polynesie (GIP), a paramilitary force set up under the previous Flosse regime and loyal only to him. Temaru supporters could not attend. Assembly speaker Antony Geros was illegally replaced by a Flosse supporter, under orders from the French High Commissioner.

In response to what he described as a “legal coup”, Temaru declared that he remained the legitimate president of the country, and he, his cabinet and hundreds of supporters occupied the presidential palace. UPLD supporters also began to occupy public buildings, while government workers went on strike and also occupied their workplaces, paralysing the capital.

As the crisis continued into November, France’s highest administrative court backed a frivolous electoral complaint by Flosse against a constituent party of the UPLD. Flosse claimed that the fact that the curtains in the polling booth in Mahina, on Tahiti’s east coast, were the same colour as that adopted by the region’s UPLD affiliate, it could have influenced the way the votes were cast. The results of 37 seats in the area were declared null and void and by-elections called. At the same time, more serious breaches by the pro-French parties were disregarded.

While Tahiti remained deadlocked without a functioning executive government, the by-elections set for February 13 became a de facto referendum on who should govern. The popular mobilisation for Temaru and the UPLD also began to tell. In the lead-up to the vote the five-party UPLD coalition was strengthened by the addition of two more parties, while Flosse’s forces were weakened by the desertion of two prominent leaders.

According to Gonschor’s Spring 2006 Contemporary Pacific article, Flosse’s supporters “once again tried to polarise voters between the political concepts of autonomy (implying ties with France) and independence”, however the resulting campaign backfired as it “polarised society to a degree seldom seen before. Almost all households declared themselves by hoisting either Temaru’s light blue and white flag, or Flosse’s orange banner. On February 5 [2005], the campaign reached its climax with another march of 15,000 to 25,000 UPLD supporters in downtown Papeete.”

Temaru’s UPLD coalition won an overwhelming victory, taking 25 seats to Flosse’s 10 seats (with the remaining two seats going to the non-aligned, pro-autonomy New Democratic Alliance [AND] coalition). Temaru was reelected president on March 3, 2005, with the support of 29 MPs, to Flosse’s 26 votes, with two abstentions.

Taui roa

The return of Temaru and the UPLD coalition on February 13, 2005, was dubbed the beginning of taui roa (big change). In May 2005, Tahitipresse reported that an opinion poll found that more than 50% of Tahitians supported the UPLD government, and that Temaru is the country’s most popular politician. However, the destabilisation did not end.

Temaru quickly moved to replace the Flosse henchman at the helm of the paramilitary GIP, Leonard Puputauki. However, GIP members refused to allow Temaru’s appointee entry to the force’s HQ. The pro-Flosse commandoes openly mutinied in March 2005 and more than 100 blockaded Papeete’s port, threatening to starve the capital of oil. Temaru backed down, withdrew his preferred appointee and instead replaced Puputauki with his second in command. Temaru finally succeeded in disbanding the GIP in January 2006.

Tensions with Paris have steadily escalated this year. In March, the Cook Islands Herald reported that during a visit to that country, Temaru had said that he “is to be called the President of Tahiti Nui in the future” and that Temaru “is determined to free and separate Tahiti Nui from the French government”. According to the newspaper, Temaru had said that “even though he has a foot in the

door the struggle [for independence] is still not over ... 'It has taken me 30 long years to get to the position I am today. And the fight has only begun.'"

French High Commissioner Anne Boquet responded in a letter sent on March 12, in which she rebuked Temaru's comments as "unacceptable". According to a March 14 report in the *Tahitipresse*, Boquet asserted that Temaru's "repeated declarations overseas in favour of independence are likely to cause concern among the people of French Polynesia and do not further the introduction of an atmosphere of trust with the [French] state".

However, Temaru again defended the right of the people of Tahiti to national self-determination in a speech in Tahiti's Austral Islands on March 25. "To maintain colonialism is a stumbling block to economic, social and cultural development", the Oceania Flash news service on March 27 quoted Temaru as saying. "The right of peoples to self-determination is recognised by the French Constitution and the United Nations Charter. And this right is inalienable. If we want to have the power to decide, let's go, it's up to us ... We absolutely need to be a free country, a free people, a sovereign people."

Again on July 17, Temaru in an address to young people attending the opening ceremony of the Pacific Youth Festival, spoke in favour of Tahiti's right to self-determination, prompting a walkout by French officials. He also condemned a decision in March by the French Council of State (France's supreme court), which ruled that the Polynesian language could not be used in the French Polynesia Assembly. Only French is allowed.

Predictably, the speeches drew sharp criticism from the pro-French parties and the French government, but also from elements within the UPLD coalition government. In April, two cabinet ministers resigned in response to Temaru's championing of independence. The desertions meant that the UPLD lost control of the parliamentary speaker's position on April 14, which went to the AND's Philip Schyle. However, the AND refused efforts by the Flosse-led opposition to enlist it in ousting Temaru in a no-confidence motion. The opposition's numbers were again culled on April 20, when Temaru adroitly reshuffled his cabinet and offered three cabinet positions to members of the opposition, restoring his majority.

On the same day as Temaru's July speech, French High Commissioner Boquet in a letter accused the Tahitian leader of "unfriendly gestures" against France, specifically his government's dedication of a monument to the victims of French nuclear testing, the renaming of a major Papeete road to Avenue Pouvanaa Oopa in honour of an early independence movement leader and Temaru's visit while in Sweden to the graves of anti-nuclear campaigners Bengt and Marie-Therese Danielsson. That he visited the burial site on July 14 - Bastille Day - seems to have particularly peeved Boquet. Temaru was unrepentant in his response to Boquet's petulant letter. According to *Tahitipresse* on July 20, Temaru defended the street name change because it was Tahiti's tribute to the first person to speak out on behalf of the Tahitian people following France's annexation of Tahiti in 1880. He added it was Pouvanaa's exile and imprisonment by France in 1958 that was "unfriendly".

Nor was the monument in downtown Papeete to the victims of France's nuclear testing program an unfriendly gesture, he said. Rather, it was "the assertion of a duty of recognition". "The unfriendly gesture was to have the nuclear tests imposed on a small population without defence ... the people were left ignorant about the potential dangers from the tests and have yet to be told of the consequences of the tests on the people and the environment", Temaru declared.

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\* From Green Left Weekly, August 23, 2006.