**The Pacific’s colonies: Ends of empire**

Pressures for independence are alive, but not always kicking

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TAHITI is usually associated with honeymoons in swanky resorts rather than with a people struggling to free themselves from the colonial yoke. Yet, on May 17th, the territory of French Polynesia, of which Tahiti is the most populous island, was reinscribed on the UN’s disapproving list of “non-self-governing territories”. The UN resolution requires France to move swiftly towards setting French Polynesia on the path to self-determination.

France boycotted the proceedings. But only 12 days earlier, elections in its scattered French Polynesian imperial outpost brought a heavy defeat for the territory’s long-standing pro-independence leader, Oscar Temaru, and victory for his arch-rival, Gaston Flosse, who vows never to let another flag fly over the presidential palace. Self-determination, the French government sniffed, “cannot be exercised against the will of the concerned populations”.

The UN’s “non-self-governing” list dates back to 1946 and originally consisted of territories reported as dependencies by the colonial powers themselves. In the decades that followed, most became independent, or were annexed, or were officially acknowledged as, in effect, enjoying political autonomy. But 16 territories around the globe, mostly minute islands in the Caribbean, Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, remain officially in the queue for decolonisation. In the Pacific they include Tokelau, Pitcairn Islands, American Samoa, Guam and New Caledonia. Each year, a UN committee meets to deliberate on their status, and to pronounce its verdict on the appropriate steps towards decolonisation.

Yet, when consulted, independence has not been the preferred option for many Pacific islanders. In two UN-supervised referendums, held in 2006 and 2007, Tokelau (population: 1,411) narrowly failed to obtain the required two-thirds majority to end its status as a New Zealand dependency, though the results were close. The 47 inhabitants of Pitcairn, still home to descendants of the Bounty’s mutineers, have no desire to end British rule. Politicians from American Samoa repeatedly ask to be removed from the UN list.

The Pacific territory with the most realistic chance of decolonisation is nickel-rich New Caledonia, a French colony since 1853. In the 1980s indigenous Kanak leaders pushing for independence managed to get their islands relisted as “non-self-governing”. Violent conflict on the island, which has a substantial French settler population, ended in 1988 only after the authorities in Paris agreed to a referendum on independence to be held ten years later. When that time came, in 1998, Kanak leaders agreed to a further delay of 15-20 years, meaning that the scheduled referendum must be held at some point before 2019—and perhaps as early as next year. Many of the French settler politicians, who remain loyal to the motherland, hope that some further compromise can again avoid a potentially polarising electoral contest.
Mr Temaru’s successful bid to have French Polynesia officially listed as still a colony was inspired by the New Caledonian experience. In the past Paris has threatened to pull the economic plug on any territory that chooses independence, explaining why many Tahitians prefer some form of loose autonomy while remaining under the French umbrella. Yet at times the government in Paris has shown signs of growing weary of its costly Pacific dependencies.

For New Caledonia, it agreed to restrict the franchise for the scheduled referendum on independence only to those who were already living in the territory for 20 years. This excluded the many métros who circulate from mainland France for short stints in public-service jobs. With support for independence hovering at around 40% of the population, that restriction of the franchise could be enough to swing the result in a referendum in favour of independence. Mr Temaru hopes for a similar arrangement. If independence eventually comes, then, it will probably be with some sort of French blessing.