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DECOLONISATION OF TOKELAU:
WHY WAS THE PROPOSAL TO BECOME SELF-
GOVERNING UNSUCCESSFUL IN THE 2006
REFERENDUM?

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Abstract

Tokelau is a Pacific Island country listed by the United Nations (UN) as a non-self-governing territory with New Zealand as its administering power. Tokelau continued to adhere to a preference for remaining a territory until 1994, when Tokelau's leadership unexpectedly declared a desire to explore its options for future self-government. A period of intensified programmes aimed at preparing Tokelau to become a self-determined nation under UN rules was initiated following the 1994 declaration. The process included reworking Tokelau's governance structure, constitutional development, and public sector capacity building. The decolonisation process culminated in February 2006 when a referendum was held in which Tokelauans voted on whether they wished Tokelau to become self-governing in free association with New Zealand. A two-thirds majority was required for the self-government proposal to pass. Only 60 per cent of the votes cast were in favour of becoming self-governing, so the proposal did not pass and there will be no immediate change to Tokelau's status. This thesis examines the factors that led to the referendum outcome.

Tokelau's decolonisation experience is explored in the context of the broader process of decolonisation in the South Pacific. Following a review of historical decolonisation processes and theories relating to these processes, Tokelauan people's explanations for the referendum outcome are outlined. The factors raised by participants in fieldwork interviews undertaken in Tokelau fall into three main themes – local divisions, lack of understanding of the concepts, and issues and doubt in Tokelau's readiness to self-govern. It is then explained how these three themes are all related to governance challenges currently being experienced in Tokelau, and how the linkages and interactions between the three themes combined led to self-government proposal being unsuccessful. A picture of the practical experience of decolonisation processes in Tokelau is thereby developed, which seeks to inform future consideration of appropriate decolonisation processes and the needs of Tokelau as it develops towards self-determination.

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Abbreviations

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
MHT	Modern House of Tokelau
OCOG	Office of the Council for Ongoing Government
TPS	Tokelau Public Service
TALO	Tokelau Apia Liaison Office
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VSA	Volunteer Service Abroad

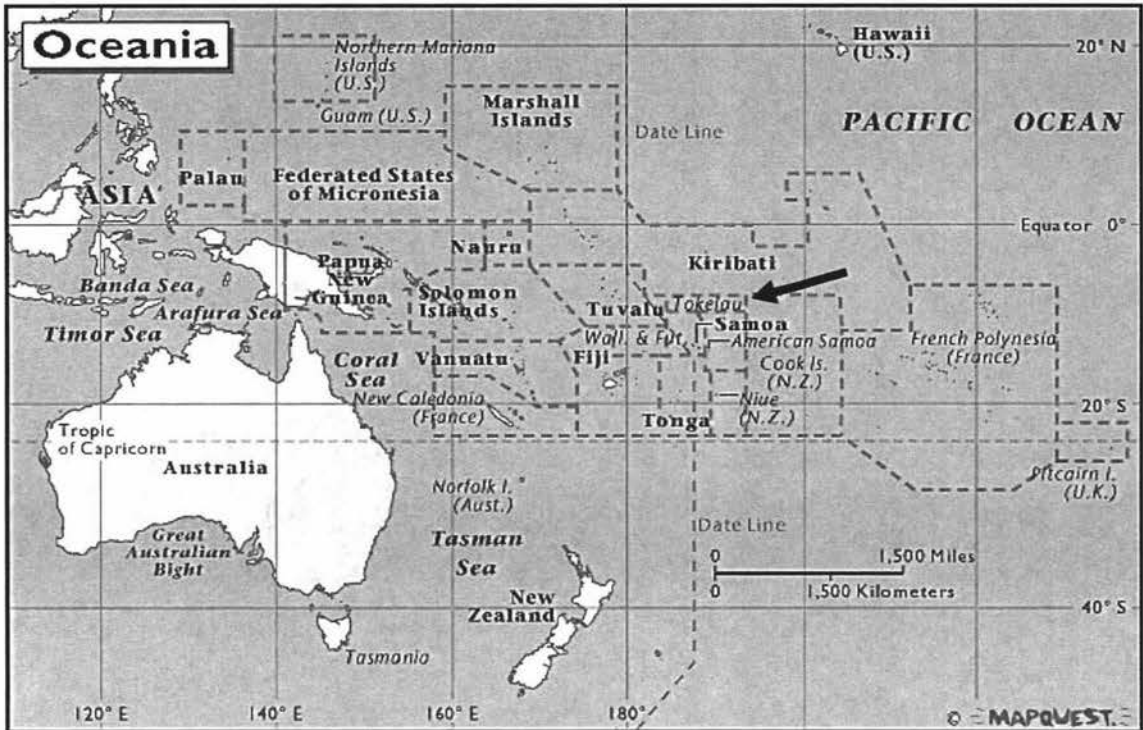
Glossary of Tokelauan Terms

<i>atiakega</i>	development
<i>aumaga</i>	men's organisation
<i>faipule</i>	village head, leader of the <i>taupulega</i>
<i>fale</i>	house
<i>fatupaepae</i>	women's committee
<i>fono</i>	meeting
<i>matai</i>	head of extended family
<i>motu</i>	islet
<i>maopopo</i>	unity, togetherness
<i>nuku</i>	village
<i>palagi</i>	European
<i>pule</i>	authority
<i>pulenuku</i>	village mayor
<i>taupulega</i>	council of elders
<i>toeaina</i>	elder/s

Pronunciation note: in Tokelauan 'g' is pronounced 'ng', 'f' is pronounced as a soft 'wh' (almost 'h').

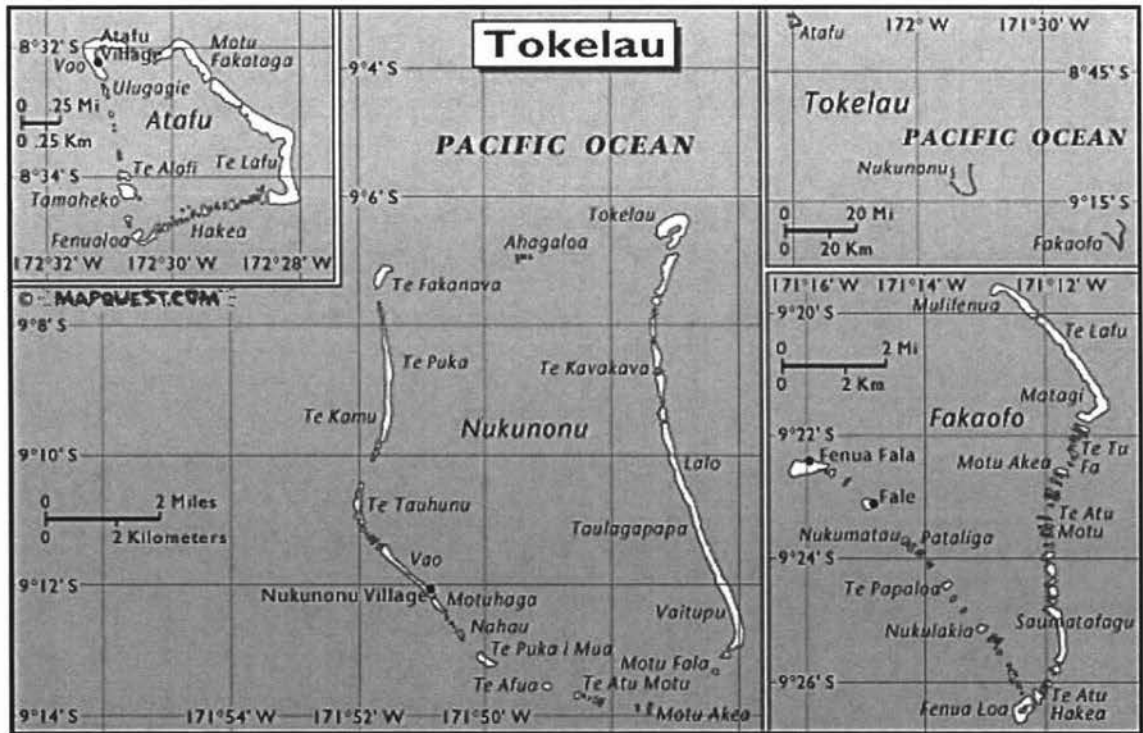
Maps

Map 1: The Pacific Islands (Tokelau indicated by arrow)



Source: Retrieved on 30 January 2007 from <http://www.mapquest.com/atlas/?region=oceania>.

Map 2: Tokelau



Source: Retrieved on 30 January 2007 from <http://www.mapquest.com/atlas/?region=tokelau>.