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## U.S.-FRANCE ANALYSIS SERIES

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### CORSICA: A NATIONAL GAMBLE

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On July 6, 2003, citizens on the French island of Corsica will vote on a new “governing statute” intended to grant the troubled region a degree of autonomy and to reform the institutions through which the French state governs the island. Corsica, a “mountain in the sea” with only 260,000 inhabitants, regularly attracts enormous attention from the French media and often gets worldwide exposure. The attention derives not simply from the violence that periodically occurs there, but rather from the profound questions that the violence raises for France and, indeed, for the very idea of a unitary, centralized democratic republic. The situation in Corsica is the most violent among the several regional movements in France—movements that also express themselves with occasional violence in the Basque Country and in Brittany. Nonetheless, the persistent violence in Corsica has been especially effective in forcing the French polity to question whether the rigidly egalitarian and centralized French republican system inherited from the French Revolution can persist in an age of ethnic identities and European integration.

In introducing the referendum, the French government has insisted that Corsica is not an exception to the French system of governance, but rather fits into an overall movement towards French decentralization. In fact, however, Corsica has already known three governing statutes in the last twenty years that were unique to the island. None of them has appeased the violent and separatist impulses. As a result of these successive statutes, Corsica has become a sort of national institutional laboratory for a policy of accelerated decentralization. The point of this policy is to create a new role for a French state that is suffering challenges to its authority both from below in the form of violent regional movements and from above through the process of European integration. For France, the Corsican experiment has thus become a political gamble with national stakes.

#### **The Island of Corsica**

Corsica is divided into two territorial entities by a mountain barrier of over 2500 metres (8200 feet). Its history and political organization has long been determined by this division between “this side of the mountain” that looks toward the port of Bastia and the Italian peninsula, and “the other side” facing the administrative capital Ajaccio and the French mainland. This mountainous territory is further compartmentalized into a variety of insular micro-regions, historically dominated by small rural villages. The local political class, always divided within itself, has no concept of a regional political identity or of the necessity of collective economic development.

From its long history of domination by the Italian city-states of Pisa and Genoa, the island inherited both a particular vernacular language and a system of clan governance in which patronage and personal ties take precedence over legal rights or ideology. The revolution of the island of Corsica against the Republic of Genoa ended with the establishment of an independent state in 1755, inspired by the French and Italian enlightenment. Pascal Paoli, the “Father of the Country”, even received from Jean-Jacques Rousseau “A

Constitutional Project for Corsica.” Thus, after the French monarchy’s purchase of rights to Corsica from the Republic of Genoa in 1768 and a bitter war of conquest, the local political class eventually supported the French Revolution in 1789. From that point forward, Corsica threw in its lot with a French state, although it remained organized along clan-based lines. In fact, the clans managed to establish themselves as the mediators between the State and the local population.

The interpenetration of French and Corsican elites grew in strength through the two Napoleonic empires and the Third Republic in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. With Napoleon, a Corsican himself, in the lead, Corsican elites joined the national political community and contributed, from within the very heart of the state apparatus, to the construction of a unitary and centralized French state. Corsicans operated and thrived at all political levels, from mayor to minister. This period of tight integration help bring into existence a Corsican lobby of national importance, which in turn also dominated the regional-level politics of Corsica.

In the rural mountain villages, the public school system of the Third Republic also became an instrument of integration into the French republican community. Public service to the French state offered a unique professional opportunity, while the French language gradually became the native language of most Corsicans. Thus, despite its geographic proximity to Italy and to Italian culture, French Corsica set itself from Italy by privileging bilateral relations between the island and the French mainland.

Although Corsica remained an agrarian region, the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did trigger a depopulation of rural areas and, even more importantly, a “brain drain,” both of which altered Corsican society. In particular, the clans become the only purveyors of local employment. During this time, the island continually proved its deep attachment to France, as in 1938 with “the oath of Bastia” to “live and die French” in the face of an irredentist Italy as well as at every regional and national election. Corsica was, in short, integrated into the logic of a centralized, secular Republican state that left little room for its deep-seeded insularity and cultural uniqueness.

### **Upheavals in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

After the Second World War, tourist and agricultural activities were developed on the coastal areas and in the uninhabited plains. People from the mainland and “repatriates” from the former French colony of Algeria began, with government assistance, to invest in the island. The French state itself became an economic investor, as in other French regions, in regional development. Various international banks invested in coastal areas that showed exceptional potential for developing tourism.

However, in the context of rural depopulation and the closing down of the traditional industries that had depended on trade with the colonies, one part of the population, particularly the youth, became increasingly disenfranchised. They began a protest based on the notion that the development of Corsica was leaving the Corsicans themselves behind. Concurrently, however, this dynamic economy also produced pockets of prosperity, leading some local economic interests to lay claim to their right to proper political representation. This liberal commercial class, involved principally in tourism and construction, built new clan-based political structures, which agitated for “less State,” that is less political and economic interference by the French state in Corsica.

In the 1960s, a minority nationalist identity movement arose on Corsica based on insular, ethnic concepts. It demanded a governing statute that would give Corsica fiscal and institutional autonomy on the model of the neighbouring Italian island of Sardinia. An alliance with the new liberal elites and their rejection of the centralized French state was accompanied by a recourse to violence. In the 1970s, the nationalist movement further radicalised and became explicitly separatist. The “Corsican Question” burst onto the

national agenda in 1975, with “the events of Aléria,” in which the occupation of a winery by local farmers resulted in a bloody struggle with the authorities and the deaths of two French policemen.

In 1976, in part in response to the events of Aléria, the militant nationalist elements created a clandestine politico-military organisation—the National Liberation Front of Corsica (FLNC – *Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse*). Led by students from the extreme right, this group’s nationalism rested on the ideas of “historical, community, and blood.” A cycle of violence and repression between small nationalist groups and state forces ensued.

The events of Bastelica-Fesch in 1980, in which several civilians were killed by what was later ruled “police misconduct,” demonstrated the existence of secret police forces sponsored by the French state. As a result, the nationalists acquired the image of the dispensers of justice, especially among the Island’s youth population. From 1981 to 1991, plastic explosives, machine guns, and assassinations were used to generate a climate of terror. The principal target was the public school system, which represented the secular egalitarian republican principles. More than a hundred teachers from metropolitan France, accused of transmitting the culture of “French state,” were forced to leave the island. Public buildings were also regularly attacked.

A synergy was soon established between political violence and organized crime. Traditional and new Corsican banditry as terrorist groups flourished in an environment of increasing withdrawal of the State and an increase in local powers. Internal tensions increased within the Island and there were violent incidents between Corsicans. In the 1990s, a full-fledged armed conflict broke out among nationalist rivals, resulting in dozens of deaths. In 1998, Claude Erignac, a “Préfet de la République,” the highest-ranking official of the French government on Corsica, was assassinated. His murderers were presumed to be former and active members of FLNC. It was the first time in the history of the French Republic that a prefect had been assassinated. In protest, 40,000 people marched in Ajaccio and Bastia and the Sicilian municipality of Palermo flew its flag at half-mast as a sign of solidarity.

### **French State Reponses**

Since 1975, the situation in Corsica has deteriorated as the State and the French republican model have continually retreated from Corsica. After the events of Bastelica-Fesch, a political settlement began to appear hopeless. With François Mitterrand’s election to French Presidency in 1981, the policy of the French government became much more favorable to the notion that Corsica had a “right to be different” and state action moved from armed repression to dialogue and then to laxity.

Faced with a radical independence movement, the State could no longer assure basic security and justice. From that point forward, governments of both the right and left minimized the existence of violence and terrorism and rarely reacted to provocations from the militants. In 1982, the Mitterrand government declared a unique blanket amnesty for separatist crimes and for cases of “police misconduct,” even for violent crimes not yet prosecuted. “Revolutionary taxes” and bomb attacks against people and possessions (over 4000 from 1980-1989) became banal experiences, as did regular appearances of masked armed commandos on the streets. The French government preferred to deal with nationalists demands, even when voice by masked men, through informal channels between national-level ministers and the clandestine politico-military organizations, rather than through the use of more public regional political bodies.

The national government finally summoned the will to root out local corruption and to restore the power of the State to enforce the law beginning in 1996. The operation, called “Clean Hands” and led by the prefect Bernard Bonnet, partly restored the population’s trust in the government. It ended in 1999 with

the revelation of a series of arson attacks committed by the police and local authorities against illegal beach restaurants and with a new institutional reform giving more power to local assemblies.

On the economic front, the State also disengaged from the management of Corsica's insular economy. The island was exempt from many taxes, while at the same time the State lavished it with public subsidies. In 1975, Corsica, which had become a region in its own right, was divided into departments corresponding to the territories of the two traditional clans. Their chiefs focused on parochial, village concerns, neglecting to put into place a development plan for the whole Island, as stipulated in the first governing statute unique to Corsica, laid down in 1982. Still lagging well behind the mainland in terms of economic development, Corsica now also receives the largest amount of EU structural funds per capita in France.

But decentralization and European integration have also served to break up the insular political class and the traditional clans basis that had until that point dominated local politics. In fact, decentralization created a conjunction of interests between the pro-European socialist government, which was generally favorable to the concept of a "Europe of Regions", the liberal commercial class desirous of less national government interference in Corsica, and the separatist movements. The 1991 governing statute gave Corsica a special status relative to the regions on the French mainland. Going even further, the next governing statute for the Island, decided on January 22, 2002 in the wake of the "the Matignon process," gave the Corsican Regional Assembly various powers to adopt laws in areas normally reserved for the central government.

### **Seeking a Solution**

The political crisis in Corsica reflects a larger crisis of the French republican model. With the disappearance of the chiefs of the traditional clans, Corsican politics has been dominated by a mosaic of local elected officials, tied together by various alliances of convenience based on their own particular interests. As such, they lack the ability to establish a regional development plan that might enjoy majority political support. The only factors that unite this disparate coalition is their common demand for exceptions from both French and European law resting on a claim of unique cultural identity and a common desire for the massive subsidies that might flow from such a claim.

Simultaneously, the French republican model is threatened from by above, by the demands of European integration. The European Union principle of subsidiarity, in which state functions are carried out at the most local level practical, is based on the example of federal states. As such, it threatens centralized nation-states such as France, even as they champion the alternatives of decentralization and de-concentration of state power. The successive institutional reforms in Corsica, resulting in three governing statutes in twenty years, all of which were unique to Corsica, gave more and more power to the "Corsican Assembly." On March 17, 2003, the French government put forward a constitutional amendment that would enshrine "a right to experiment" for all the French regions. Corsica has thus proven to be an institutional laboratory in a national process of accelerated decentralization and European integration.