
Issue Brief

(General Assembly 4)

The Question of Tokelau and New Zealand

Tokelau is an island that is considered both by New Zealand and by the United Nations Fourth General Assembly a part of the state of New Zealand. A strategically vital island for New Zealand's economy and politics, there has obviously been different standpoints as to the role of Tokelau and debates about the extent to which the island should be allowed to self-govern or more specifically, should move towards self-determination with free association. This would mean that Tokelau would be independent in terms of governing, but would continue to have a special international relationship with New Zealand through economic, political, and defensive assistance. The UN Special Political and Decolonization unit has maintained that Tokelau should have the right to decolonize under its own terms, and while all of New Zealand's other islands have successfully decided and implemented a framework through which they have self-determination, Tokelau is the only island to not yet have done so.

In the past, there have been multiple referendums held regarding the self-determination of Tokelau from New Zealand, the most recent having been held in 2007 as a follow-up of the one in 2006. The question of New Zealand is not one for the separation of Tokelau from New Zealand, but rather to gain the status of self-governing state in free association with New Zealand. Other islands, such as the Cook Islands and Niue already have this status, but in Tokelau the motion has repeatedly although narrowly failed. In the 2007 referendum, only 16 more votes were necessary to achieve the two-thirds requirement.

The question of Tokelau and New Zealand appears to be relatively simple, but confusion among the people of Tokelau as to what self-determination would entail has prevented it from coming to a consensus on whether to separate. The UN continues to assist the island in the decolonization process, but Tokelau must decide for itself whether it wishes to remain an official part of New Zealand or achieve self-determination.

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