

# Contemporary Corsica: From Assimilation to Autonomy?

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This communication deals with the Corsican political situation, which has dramatically evolved since the 1960s. We observe an increasingly salient opposition between:

- On the one hand, a unitary state, France, which seeks to make as few concessions as possible to its unitary foundations.
- On the other hand, a political movement,
  - o Which asserts the existence of a Corsican nation. In other terms, of a distinct political community, with the inherent political rights and particularly the right to decide its political present and future.
  - o Which thus claims several exceptions to the French unitary principles, and relies on a democratic legitimacy that is now unique in Europe. During the last territorial elections, in 2021, Corsican nationalists won 68% of the votes. More than their counterparts in Scotland, Catalonia, Basque Country, or South Tyrol.

In order to understand this opposition, we need to retrace the history of Corsica's integration into France. This is the tale of a recent paradigm shift, yet with moderate effects.

Corsica, which had never been an independent political entity, experienced a powerful nationalist mobilization in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century (**DIAPO1**), initiated an actual state-building process which has been internationally famous, especially thanks to Rousseau and his *Social Contract*.

## Historical Roots

### XVIIIth Century

Revolution against Genoese Republic (1729) / Adoption of a first constitutional text (1735)

State-building process, with a Constitution based on people's right to self-government (1755-1768)

French military annexation (1768-1769)

Secession then creation of an Anglo-Corsican Kingdom (1793-1796)

### XIXth Century

Disappearance of nationalist mobilizations et intellectual productions

### Between World wars I and II

Elitist and autonomist mobilisation

Corsicans revolted against the Republic of Genoa, their ruler for 5 centuries. However, Genoa was still sovereign in law, and conceded the exercise of this sovereignty to France in 1768. Corsicans refused to be sold like animals, and France needed a one-year military conquest, then many years of heavy repression.

During the French Revolution, France and Corsica first enjoyed a honeymoon, but Corsicans declared secession in 1793 and called on the other superpower of the time to found a short-lived Anglo-Corsican kingdom.

Despite all that, the integration to France did not suffer any nationalist challenge in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. One does not meet any more mobilizations nor intellectual productions based on the Corsican national idea.

However, the integration process was far from easy. Corsica had very serious public order problems, and, above all, very strong exceptions to national law, at the linguistic, judicial, economic and fiscal levels. The most famous was its special customs status, which lasted until 1912.

So, the absence of nationalist contestation was quite surprising. Corsica combined several factors related to the presence of nationalist mobilizations: particularly the geographical rupture, the experience of independence and cultural difference. In 1915, the Corsican language was still the mother tongue nearly 85% of the children.

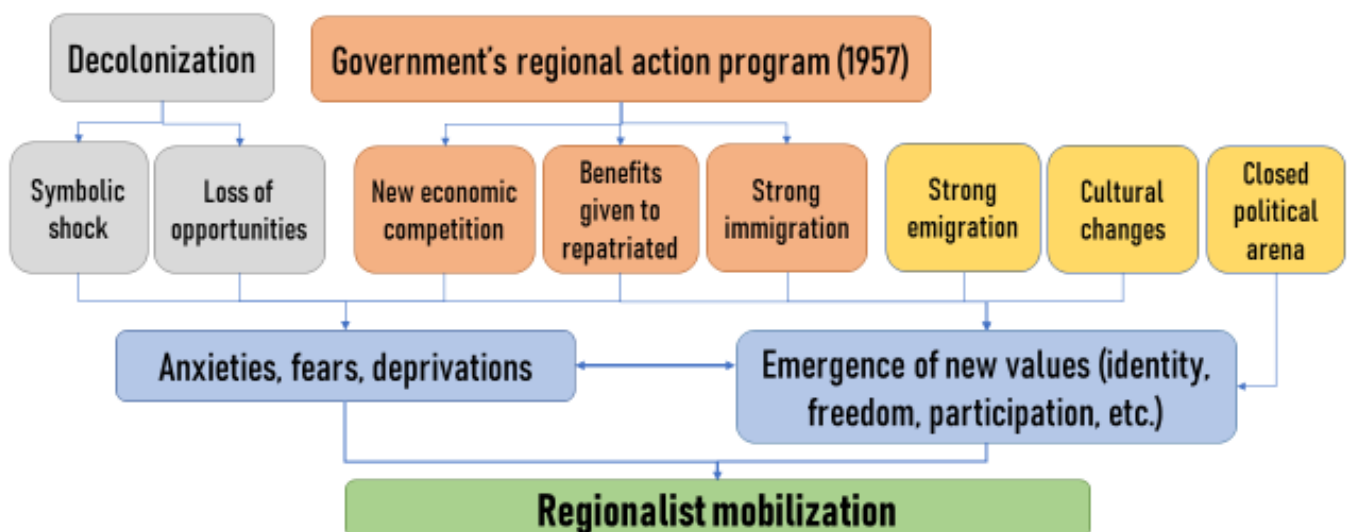
Nevertheless... this was not a kind of passive resistance. On the contrary, Corsicans were over involved in the French colonial adventures.

The key to the integration process was the total support of the Corsican notables. In an archaic, rural, poorly educated and industrialized society, they were crucial brokers between the state and island society, distributing state resources to ensure social consensus and population's loyalty. This system had been unchallenged until the First World War.

In the inter-war period, a first autonomist mobilization, carried by intellectuals, had an interesting cultural impact, but it refused to run for elections, and lost all credit because of sympathies for Italian fascism.

The current Corsican nationalist movement is thus a contemporary movement. Its emergence had been the unintended product of a modernization process designed by the State (**DIAPO2**). The 1957 regional action plan, based on farming and tourism development, was supposed to allow a "Corsican renaissance". However, it produced various anxieties and frustrations.

## A product of Modernization



On the economic level, the program actually promoted segregation. In farming, the preference given to repatriates from North Africa was obvious, through very favourable bank loans and land distribution. By 1964, only 29% of the pieces of land had been given to local farmers, bolstering the resentment of natives.

On the identity level, the program caused a demographic trouble: Corsica had lost about 40% of its population in the previous 60 years, about 120000 inhabitants, while 15000 repatriates began settling there. In addition, the tourism development was also based on an immigrant workforce, and external financial groups designed projects of tens of thousands of beds. All this fuelled the idea of a danger for the Corsican language, land and identity.

On the political level, the competition was extremely closed, dominated by two major networks of notables. This system, based on interpersonal and clientelistic ties, was sclerotic, while the Western world was shaken by emerging values. Moreover, the modernization process was driven in a very centralized way, and this called into question the real influence of the Corsican elected officials.

The first regionalist organizations appeared in 1963 and 1964, and were based on denouncing the regional action plan. Their electoral results were disappointing, but they managed to gather a significant militant force and carry out a relevant mobilization.

This regionalism was inspired by the status of the Italian regions, and it did not portray itself as the enemy of French unity, but as its saviour. The real threat to French unity would have been the state of abandonment of Corsica. Nevertheless, we observe a first radicalization in 1973, mainly because the State was unable to accept very moderate claims (**DIAPO3**).

## Nationalist radicalization(s)

**1973**

**Identification change: from regionalism to autonomism and nationalism**

**Development of clandestine violent action**

**1975**

**Failure of the first governmental accommodation attempt**

**Armed occupation of a cellar owned by a repatriate and violent state repression**

**1976**

**Creation of the *Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse* (FLNC), which unites the pre-existing violent clandestine groups and promotes independence**

On the one hand, public organizations give up the regionalist idea and endorse the nationalist one. They now assert the existence of a Corsican nation and its right to govern itself. Therefore, they claim a very broad autonomy and withdraw from the elections, which they consider corrupted by fraud. On the other hand, the first significant clandestine organization appears and the bombings will multiply.

A second phase of radicalization began rapidly. In August 1975, about fifteen autonomists armed with hunting rifles occupied the wine cellar of a repatriate. They denounced the compromises of the State and the banks with the repatriates, and demanded a redistribution of the land.

The state reacted by mobilizing at least 1,200 agents with military equipment. Two policemen were killed and one activist seriously injured during the assault. Five days later, the government dissolved the autonomist organization and Bastia, the second largest Corsican city, experienced a night of clashes that left one policeman dead and 18 others wounded by bullets.

From that point on, some activists considered that nothing could be discussed with the State. In 1976, the Corsican National Liberation Front appeared, bringing together the pre-existing clandestine groups and promoting independence, a claim which was previously very marginal. Above all, violence had a new status, from a subsidiary tool to an essential and indispensable one.

For several years, this violence symbolized what has been called the Corsican problem, but this violence can hardly be compared with that carried out in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. Despite some 8,000 bombings, it was a *specific* type of violence, much less intense. Corsican organizations never placed bombs in supermarkets or train stations, and are responsible for about 60 deaths. Moreover one third of these fatalities were nationalists killed by their own explosives or in a fratricidal confrontation during the 1990s.

This violence decreased sharply in the 2000s (**DIAPO4**), and in 2014 the main clandestine organization announced the cessation of its actions, without disarming. So, the risk of violence still exists, but the strength and legitimacy of Corsican nationalism are now clearly based on the vote of citizens.

## The decrease of clandestine violent action

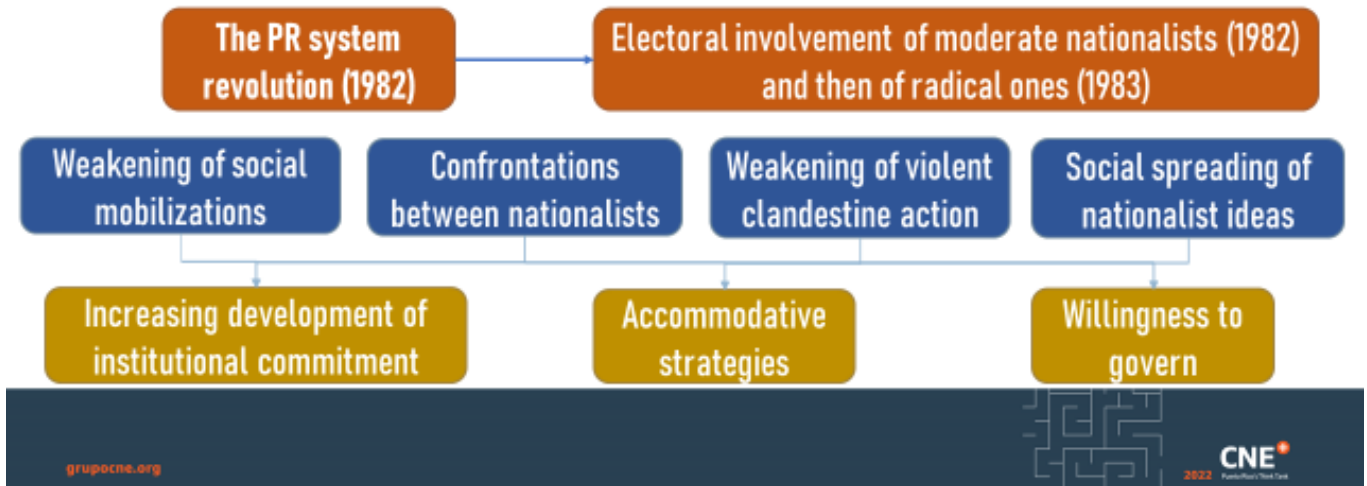
Number of bombings against public assets in Corsica. 1996-2013



The creation of a Corsican Assembly in 1982 led to the return of nationalists to the electoral arena, and fostered a slow but effective institutionalization process (**DIAPO5**). The new proportional representation system that was to be used, was supposed to allow the nationalists to be easily represented, and favoured a change of perspective. From the 1990s onwards, the contentious repertoire was gradually abandoned in favor of institutional involvement.

# The institutionalization process

- A few disappointing electoral attempts (1967-1973)
- Refusal to run for office (1973-1982)



The push will be achieved in 2015 (**DIAPO6**), when a coalition of autonomists and independentists won for the first time, with 35% of the vote, a relative majority in the Corsican Assembly. In 2017, this same coalition won more than 56% of the votes. Finally, in 2021, with a more fragmented offer of four nationalist lists in the first round, nationalism won 68% of the vote in the second one.

## Corsican nationalists in regional elections



Similarly, the nationalists had no MPs before 2017; they now have four out of six. At the local level, the progression is not so strong, but nationalist militants head the second, third and fifth municipalities of Corsica, as well as one of the two agglomeration communities.

These victories require responses from the French government. This would be quite natural. Since 1974, despite the use of clandestine violence, the state has sought accommodation with nationalism at least seven times. However, it has never reached a sufficient level of consensus.

The most obvious results are at the institutional level (**DIAPO7**). Initially, I spoke about a paradigm shift. This shift took place in 1982. We moved from the most advanced integration possible, to differentiated regionalization. The process of differentiation was developed in 1991, 2002 and 2017, but without ever affecting the constitutional distribution of powers.

## Gradual institutional change

1982	<b>Law on the special status of the region of Corsica</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Special attributions (junior high schools, identity, planning, etc.)</li><li>- Association with state public agencies (agriculture, transport, etc.)</li><li>- Special electoral system with a regional constituency (in 1982 and 1984)</li></ul>
1991	<b>Law on the status of the territorial collectivity of Corsica</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Recognition of a "Corsican people, as a component of the French people" (censured by the Constitutional Council)</li><li>- Special organization with the creation of a regional executive council (unique in mainland France)</li><li>- New attributions (national roads, teaching of Corsican language, etc.); Return to the regional constituency</li><li>- Territorialization of many public agencies (hydraulic equipment, transport, agriculture, etc.)</li></ul>
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- New attributions (environment, higher education, planning, etc.)</li><li>- Power of legislative experimentation (censured by the Constitutional Council)</li></ul>
2017	<b>Law on the status of the collectivity of Corsica</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Merger of the territorial collectivity of Corsica and the two departmental councils</li><li>- Maintaining the two departments and prefectures at the level of the State administration</li></ul>

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In other words, it has been excluded to give the Corsican assembly the power to adapt national laws and regulations to the situation of the island; the Corsican elected representatives only have the right to *propose* normative adaptations, and to *request* to be *authorized* to adapt regulations. Yet, we have never seen any interesting results.

In short,

- the foundations of the constitutional order have not been harmed,
- changes have always been moderate,
- and the institutional trajectory set in 1982 has remained the same.

It is definitely a case of gradual institutional change.

Anyway, since 2017, the Corsican question has been experiencing huge evolutions:

- the democratic legitimacy of Corsican nationalists has dramatically increased.
- but the government has resisted demands (**DIAPO8**) that breach French unitary principles, or that carry major political risks.

# Main nationalist demands

- ▶ Amnesty for jailed and researched activists
- ▶ Co-official status for the Corsican language
- ▶ « Resident status » (only those who have resided on the island on a permanent basis for a number of years can acquire land or property)
- ▶ Legislative autonomy

During President Macron's first term, the government made a counterproposal that included a constitutional revision, but was far from these demands (**DIAPO9**).

## The government's counterproposal

- ▶ Constitutionalizing Corsican singularity
- ▶ Allowing specific legislative rules, as long as they are justified by the specific features of the island (*it is already the case*)
- ▶ The Parliament can allow the Corsican assembly to adopt these specific rules itself (*this kind of mechanism has been in place since 2007 in the overseas departments and regions and has not been effective at all*)

The stalemate was total, generating frustrations that were violently expressed this March.

It is then that the government proposed opening discussions on autonomy, even mentioning the Polynesian model, which is exceptional, very different from French common law. This shift was essentially an attempt to appease the violent protesters, but has not yet had any significant impact, and the troubled political context can upset the prospects (**DIAPO10**).

- At the national level, the government is very far from having the parliamentary support necessary to revise the Constitution. Moreover, it rejected in advance some core demands, such as the co-officiality of the Corsican language.
- At the Corsican level, the rivalries between nationalists undermine the organization of the dialogue. There are four major nationalist parties, but only one is in power, and the other three are inclined to be very critical and to defend maximalist positions. A compromise seems impossible today between those who defend institutional dialogue, despite its limitations, and those who want to return to protest politics.

## Too many veto players?

National players	Corsican players
Government	Corsican executive
Senate majority	Opposition nationalist parties
Opposition parties in the National Assembly	Social or clandestine nationalist groups

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In sum, the number of regional and national veto players seems far too high to hope for a quick consensus on autonomy. However, the overall political stakes are high (**DIAPO11**), and the absence of a real debate between representatives of Corsica and the government could have very negative consequences, no matter which side you are on.

## The risks of stalemate

- ➔ Fostering radical protest, and possibly a return to clandestine violence
- ➔ Increasing the feelings of disbelief and mistrust towards France, even a “silent secession”
- ➔ Converting a lot of autonomists to independentism