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Divided Micronesia

Micronesia is having problems of a new sort.

For a time its focus was on doing battle with the United States over a more independent future status.

Now its six districts — Palau, Yap, the Marianas, Truk, Ponape and the Marshalls — are finding it hard to get together on what to do with the new freedom America is offering.

The U.S. has offered the immediate return of public lands, for example, but the Congress of Micronesia adjourned without enacting the needed enabling legislation. The land-rich districts couldn't agree with the land-poor districts on whether control should be on a district basis or belong to the central government.

Tax revenue sharing is another headache. The Marshalls, which generate more than 60 per cent of all Micronesian tax revenue of their U.S. missile testing and research bases, want 50 per cent of all tax revenue to stay in the district where it is raised. The other districts want it all to go to the central government.

The issue is so serious that the Marshalls are threatening secession, and rumbling about independent future status talks with the U.S. and/or a confederation with Nauru, which is independent, and the Gilberts, which the British would be glad to release.

The Marianas are already well-advanced on the course of secession. Informal talks in Honolulu last month have moved closer to an agreement on a permanent union with the United States, commonwealth status, their own constitution, and fairly extensive U.S. support based on the creation of defense bases on Saipan and Tinian.

With the Marianas out, the remaining five districts pretty much need each other in order to work out a viable future.

On the record of the recent Congress of Micronesia the necessary cooperative agreements are going to be hard to come by, because of the severe differences in interests among the districts.

The pains of the Micronesian districts in struggling toward future status may yet rival in miniature those of America's 13 colonies . . . and the evolution, which seemed well advanced two years ago, now may take quite a few years to complete.