

# As protests grow in New Caledonia, Australia backs France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

by Nic Maclellan

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Darmanin protest rally in November 2023

*Photo Credit: Nic Maclellan*

As the French National Assembly and Senate debate changes to New Caledonia's electoral laws, there are protests in the streets of Noumea. On Saturday 13 April, tens of thousands of supporters and opponents of independence [rallied in the capital](#), mobilising around proposed changes to voting rights in the French Pacific dependency.

Backed by local anti-independence politicians, French President Emmanuel Macron wants to open up the electoral rolls for New Caledonia's three Provincial Assemblies and Congress. The next local elections were scheduled in May, but a vote in the French National Assembly on 18 March has delayed the poll to an undetermined date before 15 December.

Currently, all French nationals of voting age resident in New Caledonia can vote for the French National Assembly and Senate in Paris, the French presidency, and in June's elections for the European Parliament. However, the Noumea Accord – a framework agreement for New Caledonia signed in May 1998 – created a category of 'New Caledonian citizens', unique in French jurisprudence. Most indigenous Kanak and many other people born or resident in New Caledonia before 1998 can vote for the three decentralised provincial administrations (in the North, South and Loyalty Islands) and the 54-member national Congress.

This restricted electorate was a crucial achievement of the [1998 Noumea Accord](#), which has framed governance in New Caledonia for 25 years. In 1999, France's Constitutional Court accepted the notion of New Caledonian citizenship and a restricted electorate, but proposed a "sliding" time limit on residency to decide who was eligible to vote. However, this restriction was "frozen" in 2007: today, in a country of 276,000 people, there are more than 40,000 French nationals who cannot vote in local elections.

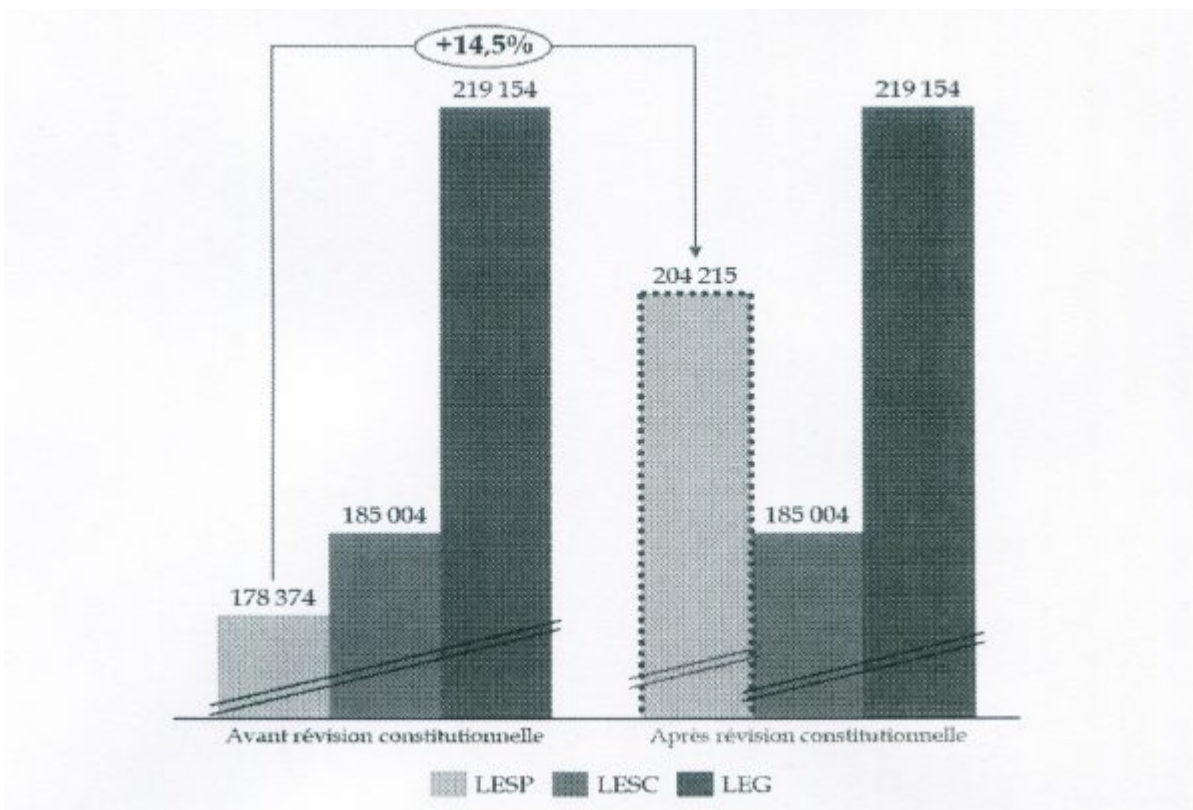
The French government now seeks to expand voting eligibility, but legislation must

pass through both houses of the French parliament, as well as a joint sitting required to amend provisions of the French Constitution. The French Senate passed the legislation on 2 April (albeit with amendments that weakened the government's bill). It now goes to the French National Assembly for a vote on 13 May.

Beyond this, key provisions of the Noumea Accord are entrenched in the French Constitution, so President Macron must also gain a three-fifths majority in a joint sitting of both houses of parliament at Versailles to change New Caledonia's complex voting system.

Under the 1998 Noumea Accord, New Caledonia has three electoral lists. All French nationals can register on the General Electoral List (LEG) to vote for the French presidency, National Assembly in Paris and municipal councils. French citizens with continuous residence in New Caledonia from 1994 to 2014 can vote in referendums on self-determination (LESC). However only those New Caledonian citizens resident before November 1998 can register on the special electoral list for the three provincial assemblies and Congress (LESP). As detailed in this graphic, current plans to increase the electorate for the local legislature would add more than 25,800 extra voters (14.5% of the current LESP).

**Figure 1: Proposed changes to New Caledonia's three electoral lists**



Source: Commission des Lois, *Senat français: L'Essentiel sur le projet de loi constitutionnelle portant modification di corps électoral pour les élections au Congrès et aux assemblées de province de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (April 2024)*, page 6.

As these parliamentary debates continue, political tensions are worsening in New Caledonia, amplified during a period of economic crisis (especially in the crucial [nickel sector](#)). The proposed reforms have split the community, and disrupted long-running talks amongst political leaders over a new political statute to replace the Noumea Accord, required after [three referendums](#) on self-determination from 2018 to 2021.

This political crisis has implications for Australia, one of New Caledonia's closest neighbours – yet is largely ignored in our debates over Indo-Pacific strategy.

In its attempt to be the “security partner of choice”, the Albanese Labor government has sought to build trade, aid and military ties across the Pacific islands – including the French dependencies. In April 2023, Senator Penny Wong became the first Australian Foreign Minister to address the Congress of New Caledonia, and the government has recently decided to grant [Australia Awards scholarships](#) to New Caledonian students (for many years, DFAT was reluctant to allocate aid funds to France).

This engagement has been welcomed by President Louis Mapou, the first Kanak independence leader to head the Government of New Caledonia in 40 years. New Caledonia has been a full member of the Pacific Islands Forum since 2016, and Mapou has been eager to [strengthen ties](#) with Australia around trade, investment and people-to-people engagement. However in [an interview last year](#), he also diplomatically highlighted key policy differences: “When Australia decides to align itself with the United States in the framework of AUKUS to acquire nuclear submarines, it raises the question: if it starts here, where will it end? How does this impact the [Treaty of Rarotonga](#) and the [Boe Declaration](#) on security?”

Such concerns from francophone independence politicians are largely [ignored or silenced](#) in the Australian media, but they highlight tensions between the Blue Pacific agenda of Forum Island Countries and Australian support for France's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Since it came to office in mid-2022, the Albanese government has held [a series of meetings](#) with President Macron and key ministers, to rebuild relations disrupted by the 2021 AUKUS announcement.

In response, Australia's Labor government is stepping back from historic support for decolonisation in the francophone Pacific, even as the independence coalition Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) mobilises for a pathway to a sovereign state.

Last year, the Albanese government joined France to abstain on a number of United Nations decolonisation resolutions. For example, each year, the UN General

Assembly calls upon administering powers like France and the United States “to terminate military activities and eliminate military bases in the Non-Self-Governing Territories under their administration.” However a [United Nations statement](#) notes that at the UN Fourth Committee in October 2023, “Australia’s representative said her delegation objected to the call on administering Powers to terminate military activities and eliminate military bases. Her country believes in the sovereign rights of nations to defend the Territories they administer.”

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles travelled to Noumea in December, as France hosted the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting for the first time. The FLNKS condemned the summit, arguing that “France is using this meeting to present our country as an ‘aircraft carrier’ ... [France] seeks to expand its presence in the region and its Indo-Pacific strategy through a remilitarisation of New Caledonia ... contrary to the principles of United Nations, for non-self-governing territories seeking to be decolonised.”

The same month, Foreign Minister Penny Wong and her French counterpart Catherine Colonna signed the new Australia-France Roadmap – A New Agenda for Bilateral Cooperation. Indo-Pacific security agendas are highlighted amongst a range of areas for co-operation, with [the Roadmap](#) stating that “enhanced Australian access to French defence facilities in the Pacific ... will facilitate a more sustained Australian presence in priority areas of operation. We are deepening military interoperability through more complex joint activities.”

In coming months, further protests will convulse New Caledonia, as French President Macron and Overseas Minister Gérald Darmanin try to [ram through the electoral reforms](#). But the mass rally of independence supporters on 13 April suggests there can be no political settlement without the Kanak people.

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Link:

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