

Crisis in New Caledonia

by Nic Maclellan

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Independence protest in Kanaky on 11 May 2024

Photo Credit: [Facebook/FLNKS-Officiel](#)

Last month, [writing for this blog](#), I said, “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.”

It wasn't hard to predict what was coming. As former French Justice Minister and Attorney General Jean-Jacques Urvoas [tweeted this week](#): “The most dismaying thing about the New Caledonian situation is that everything was predictable. Everything was written. But there are none so deaf as those that will not hear.”

Political and social polarisation have been growing in New Caledonia over the last few years, undercutting years of work to build a “common destiny” under the 1998 Nouméa Accord.

This has been exacerbated by the French State, which [rushed through](#) the third referendum on self-determination under the Nouméa Accord in December 2021. With people unable to campaign in the midst of the COVID pandemic, turnout halved compared to previous votes, as independence supporters went to church or fishing on polling day. Historians will judge the actions of Overseas Ministers Sébastien Lecornu and Gérald Darmanin harshly, as they failed to respond to oft-repeated warnings from Kanak leaders.

After the failed 2021 referendum, the report of the Pacific Islands Forum observer mission raised [serious concerns](#) over the legitimacy and credibility of the poll, noting:

The self-determination referendum that took place 12 December 2021 did so with the non-participation of the overwhelming majority of the indigenous people of New Caledonia. The result of the referendum is an inaccurate representation of the will of registered voters and instead can be interpreted as a representation of a deep-seated ethnic division in New Caledonia, which the Committee fears has been exacerbated by the State's refusal to postpone the referendum.

Ever since then, independence leaders (and cooler heads in Paris) have raised concerns that holding a decolonisation referendum without the participation of the colonised people was meaningless.

This hasn't stopped successive Australian governments from avoiding this conundrum. This week, a DFAT spokesperson told me:

Australia values our relationship with both New Caledonia and the French State. We respect and support the referendum process under the Nouméa Accord and discussions underway ... We encourage all parties to work together constructively to shape New Caledonia's institutional future.

This avoids the core problem, given there's currently no longer a referendum process after the three polls between 2018 and 2021! In recent years, the FLNKS has repeatedly argued that any political agreement and new statute for New Caledonia must include a clear pathway involving a referendum, with a transition towards an "interdependent" sovereign state. Both Paris and key anti-independence parties won't publicly commit to this, despite extensive discussions in 2023 and 2024.

Now, the French government has moved to change the residency requirement that defines New Caledonian citizenship, without integrating this change into a comprehensive, overarching package that addresses the concerns of both supporters and opponents of independence. In response, the FLNKS has sought international support to pressure the French State, from the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and the Pacific Islands Forum.

Both Fiji and Papua New Guinea are members of the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation, which since 1986 has listed New Caledonia as a UN non-self-governing territory under French administration. On 29 March, key Kanak leaders wrote to Fiji's UN Ambassador Filipo Tarakinikini, requesting "the support of your Government in order to ensure that the right of the colonised people of New Caledonia to self-determination is respected." They called on Fiji "to support our position within the UN Special Committee, so that this body can remind the

administering power of the imperatives it must respect in terms of decolonisation.”

This week, the current chair of the MSG, Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, also reaffirmed MSG support “for the FLNKS position opposing the French government’s constitutional bill aimed at unfreezing New Caledonia’s electoral roll.”

Over three nights this week, the mainly youthful protesters have launched astounding, damaging attacks across greater Noumea: looting or torching businesses, factories, cars and public buildings, while street-fighting with hundreds of French gendarmes and riot police. As MSG chair, Salwai endorsed the call for calm from the FLNKS Political Bureau and the President of New Caledonia Louis Mapou, pointing out that “the indiscriminate destruction of property will affect New Caledonia’s economy in a very big way and that will have a debilitating cascading effect on the welfare and lives of all New Caledonians.”

Australian researchers are beginning to analyse the widespread phenomenon of [riots in the Pacific](#), which have affected countries as diverse as French Polynesia, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and now New Caledonia. As the crisis abates, it will be important to unpack the drivers of the current destruction in Noumea: not only the opportunistic looting and thrill-seeking, but the cultural and political values that reflect the alienation of many young people from their leaders and institutions. Social media images of young rioters waving the flag of Kanaky also reflect the fundamentally nationalist content of these protests by a new generation born after the Nouméa Accord.

Beyond this, repeated lectures about “democracy” from French politicians carry little sway in a colonial context, which is — by its very nature — anti-democratic. As I’ve [written elsewhere](#), the contradictions of French autonomy and indigenous independence sentiment are more evident since 2021 (for the first time in forty years, the leader of New Caledonia’s government is a pro-independence, Kanak politician, while French Polynesia also has a pro-independence leader). However New Caledonia’s Louis Mapou inherits an economic and social catastrophe after this week’s explosion of anger and will look to Pacific neighbours for practical solidarity to rebuild the shattered nation.

It’s almost beyond parody that, as suburbs across Nouméa went up in flames, this week’s federal budget included \$20 million in funding for the [Australia-France Roadmap](#), including an Indo-Pacific Studies Program “to support academic and professional engagement on security and defence trends to shape policymaking to respond to Indo-Pacific needs.” This is about China, not French colonialism, and a stunning example of the way geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific is swamping the region’s Blue Pacific agenda.

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The present crisis in New Caledonia has a long way to play out, but a few things are already clear. First, massive economic and social inequality in the territory (far greater than in most island states) is a driver of the political crisis, exacerbated by the crisis in the nickel industry. Second, New Caledonia's regional neighbours — particularly Australia and New Zealand — must stop their trite rhetoric about France as “a Pacific nation”. France is a European colonial power, which administers non-self-governing territories on the other side of the globe and maintains a colonial policy a quarter of the way through the 21st century. Finally, there can be no political settlement to replace the Nouméa Accord without the Kanak people.

The current polarisation will need regional assistance to drive reconciliation. Unless the Pacific Islands Forum and other regional organisations start putting actions, not just words, behind this reality, there's trouble ahead. With Bougainville, M?o'hi Nui, West Papua, Guåhan and other self-determination crises in the wings, the failure to address colonialism will continue to ruin lives and livelihoods in Oceania.

Read more on the change to the residency requirement [in the April 2024 blog](#).

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