

Macron declares state of emergency in New Caledonia as riots erupt over voting change

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17 May 2024

French President Emmanuel Macron declared a state of emergency in the Pacific colony of New Caledonia on Wednesday after three young indigenous Kanaks and a police officer were killed in riots that began on Monday. A second police officer was reported dead on Friday. More than 200 people have been arrested and more than 300 injured in the capital Nouméa and surrounding areas.

The rioting erupted as the French National Assembly pushed through a constitutional amendment to allow French residents who have lived in New Caledonia for 10 years since 1998 the right to vote in provincial elections and for the local Congress, or parliament.

Pro-independence leaders claim that “unlocking” the electoral system will dilute the vote held by Kanaks, who make up 41 percent of the population, in favour of those more likely to uphold France’s colonial rule over the South Pacific territory.

The riots followed weeks of unrest and rising tensions with demonstrations involving tens of thousands both for and against the measure. On April 13 as many as 58,000 pro-independence and 35,000 pro-France marchers took part in competing protests in Nouméa, under heavy security surveillance with police reinforcements from France.

Over two days and nights rioters torched vehicles and businesses and looted stores. Schools were shut and a curfew put in place in the capital. On Tuesday security forces regained control of Nouméa’s prison, which holds about 50 inmates, after an uprising and escape attempt by prisoners.

Radio NZ (RNZ) reported Thursday night that France’s high commissioner Louis Le Franc claimed that despite the emergency crackdown some 3,000-4,000 rioters were still “in action” on the capital’s streets and another 5,000 in the Greater Nouméa area.

Shops are now running out of food and hospitals are calling for blood donations. A second police officer died on Thursday, victim of a reported “friendly fire” incident. According to RNZ, thousands of guns are circulating in the local community in defiance of bans.

Earlier *Le Monde* reported that Le Franc said the situation

was “insurrectional,” and could take on “a form of civil war.” A prominent New Caledonia anti-independence figure, former minister Sonia Backès, similarly declared there was a “civil war” and called for the army to intervene.

France’s security measures are however in line with repressive police-state assaults by the Macron government on workers and students in mainland France. Prime Minister Gabriel Attal declared that the 12-day state of emergency “will allow us to roll out massive means to restore order.” It gives authorities extensive powers to ban gatherings, impose travel bans, house arrests and searches.

Le Monde also reports that anti-independence New Caledonian residents have formed “armed militias” and that “unverifiable rumours backed up by photos of pick-up trucks with smoked windows, speak of punitive expeditions in which young Kanaks are supposedly [being] hunted down. A verified video broadcast... showed a white man deliberately shooting at two young Kanak men walking along the road in the Magenta district.”

By Friday 1,000 extra security personnel had been dispatched from Europe—taking the number of police and gendarmes on the island from 1,700 to 2,700. Troops are securing ports and the international airport. The local government has banned TikTok claiming it had previously helped rioters organise and attract “troublemakers” to the streets.

Ten people, alleged members of a pro-independence group known as The Field Action Coordination Unit, are under house arrest. Overseas Territories Minister Gérald Darmanin denounced the group as “radical and violent leaders,” committed to “looting, murder and violence.” He told AFP: “The (French) state will regain total control.”

The last time Paris took similar measures was in January 1985, during violent conflicts between authorities and the pro-independence movement that spanned most of the 1980s. In 1986, French elite troops brutally put down an insurrection on the island of Ouvéa, massacring 19 Kanaks.

The current restricted voting law is a product of the 1998 Nouméa Accord, brokered by the then Socialist Party

government in Paris as a “compromise” between the pro-independence and anti-independence factions to maintain French control over its strategically important colony.

While setting out a long-term process for a series of three independence referenda, the agreements gave limited influence to a privileged Kanak layer, led by the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS). Seeking a larger slice of the economic pie and greater political say, the indigenous elite is now part of the establishment with a vested interest in maintaining the existing voting arrangements.

The Macron government is determined to impose the voting change as it tightens Paris’ grip on the colony. As the United States and its allies prepare for war against China, French imperialism is seeking to play a role in the militarisation of the Pacific. New Caledonia hosts a major military base and holds nearly a quarter of the world’s reserves of nickel, essential in the manufacture of stainless steel and in the defence industry.

Visiting Nouméa last July, Macron bluntly told those in favour of “separatism” they should accept the pro-France victory in the final independence referendum in 2021, which was boycotted by pro-independence parties during the COVID pandemic.

On Tuesday, France’s lower house voted 351 in favour and 153 against the constitutional change, which still requires a two-thirds majority of both houses to pass. Macron said he would delay the process and invite representatives of the territory’s parties for talks to reach a negotiated settlement. However, he insisted that agreement be reached by next month or he would sign it into law.

New Caledonia’s parties have issued a joint statement calling for “calm and reason.” On Wednesday, pro-independence leader Daniel Goa called on people to “go home” and condemned looting. But he added: “The unrest of the last 24 hours reveals the determination of our young people to no longer let France take control of them.”

The explosive tensions that have erupted in the riots are in fact more deeply rooted than unresolved frustrations over independence. The crisis comes at a time of escalating economic turmoil and social discontent. Unemployment registered 10.8 percent in 2023, but among youth is 26 percent, mainly affecting young Kanaks.

An economic crisis looms as the country’s nickel mining and smelting industry, which until recently employed a quarter of the total workforce, is in sharp decline. Amid plummeting world prices, it faces competition from Indonesia and China that are producing much cheaper nickel. Last month the giant Koniambo plant was idled as its major financier Glencore seeks a potential buyer for its 49 percent shareholding.

The local government led by President Louis Mapou—a pro-independence Kanak politician from the National Union for Independence, part of FLNKS— which shares office with two anti-independence parties, is at loggerheads over measures to impose the growing cost of living crisis. Differences over tax policies, especially on fuel, have seen protests and blockages resulting in fuel depots becoming inaccessible and service stations facing fuel shortages.

The unrest in New Caledonia has implications for the entire region, which is sitting on a social tinderbox. January saw a wave of riots in Papua New Guinea amid escalating living costs and social discontent wracking the Pacific’s largest country and one of the world’s most impoverished.

Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai sharply criticised Macron, saying the crisis could have been avoided “if the French government had listened, and not proceeded to bulldoze the Constitutional Bill.” He affirmed the support of the regional Melanesian Spearhead Group, which he chairs, for the FLNKS position opposing the bill.

The local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, are backing France, which is an important ally in the US-led war preparations against China. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, cancelling the New Caledonia leg of his latest Pacific tour, said “the escalating situation and violent protests in Nouméa” were “of serious concern across the Pacific Islands region.”

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said his government was “monitoring” the situation and warned Australians to “stay safe.” He airily declared: “Australia values very much our relationship with both New Caledonia and the French state.”

In fact, last year the Albanese government supported France by abstaining on a number of United Nations decolonisation resolutions. According to the DevPolicyBlog, in October Australia’s UN representative objected to a call on administering powers to terminate military activities and eliminate military bases. Australia believed, she said, “in the sovereign rights of nations to defend the Territories they administer.”



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