

New Caledonia's constitutional amendment “suspended,” not withdrawn

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French President Emmanuel Macron said last week he had “suspended,” but not withdrawn, New Caledonia’s contentious amendment to expand the country’s voter rolls and allow recent immigrants to vote in local elections. The move triggered violent unrest in the French Pacific colony.

During a press conference in Paris on June 12, Macron referenced the now-dissolved National Assembly’s “pending projects,” saying “my wish is that they can be resumed [after France’s snap elections] once a majority is confirmed, enlarged or formed with other partners.”

Macron said the bill on New Caledonia had to be suspended “in order to give maximum strength to the dialogue on the ground and to return to order.”

The amendment was approved by both houses of parliament but is yet to be ratified by a vote at the Congress—a bicameral sitting with a 60 percent majority needed to amend the constitution. Following a visit to New Caledonia on May 23, Macron declared he would summon Congress before the end of June but would not “force through” the changes.

Earlier, Macron had appointed three senior public servants to negotiate a “comprehensive agreement” with New Caledonia’s contesting parties on the colony’s political future. The officials have since been recalled to Paris.

The constitutional change is opposed by pro-independence parties and groups which claim it will dilute the vote of indigenous Kanaks who make up over 40 percent of the population. The passage of the law through France’s National Assembly on May 13 provoked an eruption of social anger by thousands of Kanak youth, devastating the capital Nouméa and nearby districts.

During his visit, Macron made clear that full independence was off the agenda. He told political leaders that the third self-determination referendum, held in December 2021 in which 96 percent voted to stay with

France amid a boycott by the pro-independence parties, would not be relitigated. “I will not go back on this,” he insisted.

The situation is in limbo until after the French elections on June 30 and July 7. The Congress will not be able to convene before mid-July. The New Caledonia amendment, as endorsed by both Houses, is formulated in such a way that it must “come into force on 1 July 2024,” meaning it will lapse.

The election is being conducted amid a sharp rightward shift by the French ruling elites following large gains for far-right parties in the recent European Parliamentary elections. Macron’s party, Renaissance, polled less than 15 percent of the vote while the anti-immigration National Rally headed by fascistic Marine Le Pen secured over 31 percent. Le Pen is, if anything, more committed to strengthening France’s hold on New Caledonia than Macron. She bluntly tweeted in 2017: “New Caledonia is France.”

In their joint election manifesto, the parties of the so-called leftist “popular front”—France Unbowed (LFI), the Socialist Party (PS), Communist Party (PCF) and Greens—call for the New Caledonia reforms to be abandoned as a “gesture of appeasement” and to return to “the path of dialogue and a search for consensus.” The document promises a “common destiny in the spirit of the Matignon and Nouméa Accords, with impartiality of the French State.”

This is a complete fraud. Whatever happens in the election, France is not about to cede control over the strategically significant territory. All factions of the political establishment are preparing intensified war on the working class at home and imperialist war abroad, including against China in the Pacific. New Caledonia hosts a major French military base and holds nearly a quarter of the world’s reserves of nickel, essential to the defence industry.

The colony remains under the heel of a repressive police-military operation intended to suppress the simmering unrest under control. Macron imposed a 12-day state of emergency on May 15 and demanded pro-independence leaders use their influence to get protesters' blockades around the main island dismantled. French security forces, now numbering some 3,500 and supported by armoured riot vehicles, will stay as long as necessary to maintain "Republican order," Macron has declared.

Last week, France's High Commissioner in Nouméa, Louis Le Franc, announced that the 6pm-6am curfew would remain in effect until at least June 17. Public gatherings, the sale and transport of weapons and the sale of alcohol are prohibited.

The riots have left an estimated 7,000 people without jobs. Damage of €1 billion has hit the economy with some 500 business and stores looted or destroyed by arson and the nickel industry on minimum capacity. Shortages of food and fuel are contributing to ongoing tension. More than 2,700 French and foreign tourists and visitors have been evacuated by military aircraft.

Intensive military-police activities against Kanak protesters are ongoing. On June 13, *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan posted scenes on X of a major operation involving 200 police, helicopters and armoured cars around Mount Dore, a town south of Nouméa that has been isolated from the capital for weeks.

One of the French police units is the notorious Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale (GIGN), which is bitterly resented by the Kanak community. GIGN forces were active alongside elite French commandos during the May 1988 hostage crisis on the island of Ouvéa. The resulting massacre saw 19 Kanaks killed, some executed after surrendering.

Data from the French High Commission shows that nearly 1,200 people were arrested between May 13 and June 10. According to Maclellan, Camp Est, the main prison in Nouméa, is desperately overcrowded "with deplorable conditions and 90 percent of inmates Kanak." Some convicted protesters are now being deported to France.

A ninth person was reported to have died in hospital from injuries on June 12. The Kanak man in his thirties was shot in the chest by a GIGN officer on May 29 in the suburb of Dumbéa. Offering his condolences, New Caledonia's pro-independence President Louis Mapou said: "Nine too many—a deeply regrettable situation for our country." He reiterated calls for "calm" and insisted on the removal of remaining roadblocks.

The various factions of the local political elite are positioning themselves to push their respective agendas in the coming election. A united coalition of anti-independence parties, including the two closest to France, the Loyalistes and extreme-right Rassemblement National, has formed to contest the two local electorates.

However, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) coalition delayed a Congress scheduled for last Saturday over reported "differences." Tensions have simmered between two of the four parties, Union Calédonienne and Parti de libération Kanak (Palika), as Macron ramped up pressure on them to bring the rebellion to heel.

The FLNKS, which represents a privileged Kanak layer within the local establishment, was caught flat-footed by the uprising that erupted from below and outside its control. Behind the pro-independence slogans, the riots have been driven by deepening social and economic misery, particularly affecting alienated young Kanaks. The poverty rate among Kanaks, the largest community, is 32.5 percent, compared to 9 percent among non-Kanaks. Youth unemployment is 26 percent.

French intransigence is, at the same time, undermining its ambitions to cement its diplomatic and military presence in the wider Pacific, including among island governments concerned about unrest among their own citizens.

On June 12 Papua New Guinea, which saw devastating riots in January, and Fiji, with an unstable authoritarian government, urged the UN's Special Committee on Decolonization to immediately send a mission to assess the situation in New Caledonia. Fiji's UN representative Filippo Tarakinikini said; "Taking up arms against each other is not the solution, nor is the militarization and fortification by authorities in the territory the correct signal in our Blue Pacific continent."

New Caledonia has been listed by the UN as a "non-self-governing territory" under French administration since 1986. In the Pacific, American Samoa, French Polynesia, Guam, Pitcairn and Tokelau are also on the list, among 17 territories worldwide that are home to 2 million people and mostly part of the former British empire.



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