

New Caledonia sees surge in pro-independence vote in French election

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Citizens in the Pacific colony of New Caledonia went to the polls in large numbers on July 7 to vote in the second round of elections for the French National Assembly. Polling for the territory's two constituencies was held under tight security after almost eight weeks of violent unrest and rioting.

The snap election was a debacle for President Emmanuel Macron, whose Ensemble coalition came in second place behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Front (NFP). Voters mobilised against both Macron, the "president of the rich," and the far-right National Rally (RN), testifying to broad left-wing sentiment and a rejection of neo-fascism among workers and youth.

In New Caledonia, the election saw a surge in support for pro-independence candidates against Macron's move to push through the French parliament a change to eligibility rules for the territory's local elections. The Kanak independence movement claims it would further marginalise indigenous votes.

The poll took place amid a brutal police-military crackdown in which a French occupying force of 3,700 security personnel have been deployed to suppress political unrest. Five pro-independence leaders who were arrested on June 22 and deported to jails in mainland France will remain there pending trial, a Nouméa court ruled on Friday.

For the National Assembly, Emmanuel Tjibaou won the predominantly indigenous Kanak Northern constituency while Omayra Naisseline fell short in the electorate covering Nouméa and the Loyalty Islands. Tjibaou becomes only the second pro-independence Kanak, and the first since 1986, to enter the National Assembly.

Tjibaou, of the Union Calédonienne (UC), decisively defeated Alcide Ponga, president of the anti-

independence, right-wing Rassemblement-LR, by 57.01 to 42.99 percent. A high turnout ensured overwhelming support for Tjibaou in the main island's independence strongholds of Thio, Pouébo and Pouvoua. Ponga took the conservative rural towns, but by much smaller margins.

In the second constituency, sitting MP Nicolas Metzdorf (Loyalistes-Rassemblement) retained his seat with 52.41 percent of the vote. However, this result was closer with Naisseline receiving 47.59 percent. While Metzdorf's support came mainly from the wealthy areas around Nouméa, Naisseline carried the Loyalty Islands, her home.

With a high voter turnout of 69 percent (72 percent in the Northern constituency) the pro-independence bloc won 9,366 more votes than the pro-France right, marking a substantial setback to the Loyalists which previously held both seats in the French Lower House.

Tjibaou is the son of the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, founder of the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS). He signed the "power sharing" 1988 Matignon Accord with Paris, bringing to an end the civil war conditions that prevailed throughout the 1980s. Tjibaou was gunned down a year later by a "hard-line" member of the pro-independence movement. Emmanuel's brother, Joël Tjibaou, has been indicted over the riots and is currently incarcerated in Nouméa's Camp-Est prison.

Tjibaou's candidacy, marking his entry from community organising into official politics, was part of the efforts of the four-party FLNKS leadership to bring the ongoing unrest under control and confine opposition to the dead-end of parliamentary politics.

Tjibaou told public broadcaster NC la 1ère that as an elected official he has a "responsibility" in the current crisis and deplored the "dramatic situation" of the riots. He declared that there is a need to urgently "restore the

conditions” for a “dialogue” to resume between the pro-independence and pro-France parties.

Tjibaou claimed that the election was “a proof that democracy is alive” and that this should be the “only way” for people to express themselves. “We all have to offer a framework for discussions to resume, between the three partners which are France, the FLNKS and the Loyalists... We have to capitalise on this,” he said.

Metzdorf welcomed Tjibaou’s statement, saying “we should, all of us, go back to the table... [Tjibaou] is someone we can talk to, a democrat... Now it remains to be seen whether Mr Tjibaou will be able to make his moderate stance heard by his political structure at large.”

The rioting that erupted on May 13 broke out largely among alienated Kanak youth, outside the control of the official pro-independence leadership, and reflected widespread anger over poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Nine people have been killed while Nouméa and surrounding districts remain devastated. Hundreds have been injured and over 1,200 arrested. Damage of €1.5 billion is estimated, with up to 500 businesses and stores looted or destroyed by arson.

Despite the massive police-military operation and political pressure by Macron, the rebellion has not been ended. The FLNKS admitted last month that it had failed to persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because they were not convinced Macron would drop the electoral reform. Macron announced on June 12 he had “suspended,” but not withdrawn, the contentious amendment.

In France, the far-right Rassemblement National gave its backing to Macron’s constitutional reform and demanded the “restoration of order” and continued French colonial domination of New Caledonia. RN leader Marine Le Pen bluntly declared that the colony could not expect to see independence for “30 or 40 years.”

France Unbowed (LFI) and NFP alliance leader Mélenchon accused Macron of responsibility for the unrest in the territory. He also declared the transfer of leading activist Christian Tein to a French prison as “an alienation of his rights and a gross and dramatic political mistake.” The NFP’s joint election statement called for the constitutional reforms to be abandoned as a “gesture of appeasement” and a return to “the path of dialogue and a search for consensus.”

While there is no formal alliance between the NFP and New Caledonia’s FLNKS, Tjibaou will enter the French parliament seeking the support of these forces for a negotiated “solution” to the question of independence. Nothing will be done to alleviate the underlying social crisis that fuelled the rebellion.

The limited criticisms Mélenchon made during the campaign about the situation in New Caledonia and his vague calls for “dialogue” and “consensus” are worthless. The NFP is preparing to make far-reaching concessions to Macron in order to forge a right-wing government.

The NFP supports Macron’s reactionary policies, including measures for police-state rule and, above all, the escalation of NATO’s war with Russia. It also supports France’s continued military presence in the Pacific region, where the imperialist powers, led by the US, are preparing for war with China.

Whatever administration emerges from the negotiations around the hung parliament, French imperialism is not about to cede control over its strategically significant Pacific territory with its major military base and reserves of nickel.



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