

Regional tensions escalate over ongoing New Caledonia crisis

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As the outcome of France's July 7 elections remains unclear, with the parties of the New Popular Front (NFP) engaged in bitter internal factional struggles and the ruling elite manoeuvring to form a far-right government, the crisis enveloping the French Pacific colony of New Caledonia continues to mount.

The snap election was a debacle for President Emmanuel Macron, whose Ensemble coalition came in second place behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 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 produced 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 which the independence movement claimed would further marginalise indigenous votes.

In the territory's poll, Emmanuel Tjibaou of the Union Calédonienne won the predominantly Kanak Northern constituency, becoming only the second pro-independence Kanak, and the first since 1986, to enter the French Assembly. In the second constituency, sitting pro-France MP Nicolas Metzdorf retained his seat against a strong performance by pro-independent Omayra Naisseline.

After more than two months of violent unrest amid a police-state operation by over 3,700 French forces, the rebellion, largely by impoverished Kanak youth, has not been suppressed. Last week a fresh batch of armoured vehicles and firetrucks was delivered to security forces. Meanwhile, five pro-independence leaders who were arrested on June 22 and deported to jails in mainland France remain there pending trial.

The crackdown claimed its 10th victim on July 10 in an exchange of gunfire in the village of Saint Louis, near the capital Nouméa between Kanaks and French gendarmes. The authorities immediately placed the blame on the victim, a nephew of prominent pro-independence politician and

local Congress chairman Roch Wamytan, saying he had shot at the gendarmes, who then returned fire.

Public Prosecutor Yves Dupas claimed a group of "armed snipers," including the victim, entered the Church of Saint Louis, from where they opened fire. Gunfire exchanges had also been reported the previous day, when security forces launched an operation attempting to dismantle roadblocks and barricades in the pro-independence stronghold.

Islands Business correspondent Nic Maclellan told RNZ Pacific the area had a long colonial history. In 1878 there was a revolt in the north and centre of the country. As the French military moved in, attacking villages, people fled to the outskirts of the capital. St Louis is one of the areas where survivors from the past conflicts had fled to. "It is a strong community, largely Kanak," Maclellan said.

The Saint Louis church was last week burnt down, along with the Catholic Mission's presbytery and residence. In the village of Vao on the Isle of Pines, another landmark Catholic mission was destroyed by arson. New Caledonia's pro-independence President Louis Mapou condemned them as criminal "irresponsible acts," saying they undermined the values of "fraternity and sharing on which New Caledonia's society is based."

In fact, the rioting erupted outside the control of the official pro-independence leadership and reflected widespread anger over poverty, inequality and social exclusion. The rebellion continues to defy both the security crackdown and pressure by Macron on New Caledonia's political establishment to bring it to heel. The four-party Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) admitted last month that it had failed to persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because the rebels were not convinced Macron would drop the electoral reform.

Calls to divide the territory into pro-and anti-independence provinces are now being pushed by Sonia Backès, the pro-France president of the Provincial Assembly of the Southern Province, which includes the affluent suburbs of Nouméa. She said the project of a New Caledonia institutionally united and based on living together is "over." Backès

insisted that when two opposing forces are convinced they are legitimately defending their values, they face a choice of “fighting each other to the death or separating so they can live.”

Such a program could only be implemented through massive state repression and openly racist policies of an apartheid character.

French imperialism’s determination to enforce its grip on the Pacific colony is escalating tensions across the region. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) wants to send a delegation to New Caledonia to investigate the crisis before a PIF Leaders Meeting in Tonga in August. Forum Chair and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown said a request for such a mission had been received from the New Caledonia government, a PIF member, but emphasised that it “will require the support of the Government of France for the mission to proceed.”

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), formed in 1986 by Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands to back decolonisation, has bluntly blamed France for the riots and demanded it drop the electoral reform. MSG leaders who met on the sidelines of a Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM10) in Tokyo last week called on France to allow a United Nations-MSG mission to assess the political situation and “propose solutions.”

The MSG leaders expressed strong opposition to the “apparent militarisation” of the French territory and said the National Assembly’s passing of the constitutional bill to “unfreeze” the electoral roll for the provincial elections “precipitated the carnage that followed.” Supported by Brown, they called on France to undertake another referendum on independence due to their “dissatisfaction” with the third referendum in 2021, which they deemed a “forceful and unilateral decision by the French State.” That poll saw a 96 percent vote to remain with France after it was boycotted by the independence movement.

Speaking at the PALM meeting, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters also questioned the legitimacy of the third referendum, saying it may have been technically within the 1998 Nouméa Accord, but “not the spirit.” Peters sharply criticised France for pushing through the voting law, saying it had compounded “the sense of democratic injury for pro-independence forces.” In New Caledonia, he declared, “we hope to see more diplomacy, more engagement, more compromise.”

Peters, whose political career is based on nationalism, anti-immigrant chauvinism and populist dog-whistling, has no concern for ordinary people in New Caledonia or anywhere else. His principal mission is to fully integrate New Zealand into the expanding US-led military alliance in the Indo-Pacific and prepare for war against China. To that end, he

has conducted four tours of the Pacific since December to pull tiny Pacific nations into line.

There are also long-standing tensions between New Zealand and France, who have competing imperialist interest in the Pacific. In an act of state terrorism, in 1985 French secret service agents bombed and sank the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* which was moored in Auckland Harbour, killing a crew member. The ship was preparing to protest a French nuclear test at Mururoa Atoll near Tahiti.

Peters, and no doubt all the local political elites are, above all, alarmed that Paris’s provocative handling of the crisis will exacerbate popular discontent across the region. The New Caledonia riots, which follow similar deadly outbreaks in Papua New Guinea in January and the Solomon Islands in 2021, have deeper roots than frustrations over independence.

Escalating economic and social tensions are fuelling the crisis. As global nickel prices tumble, the territory’s crucial nickel mining and smelting industry is in turmoil, faced with increasing competition from emerging world producers such as Indonesia and China. Hundreds of jobs have already been axed with thousands more at risk. Clashes have previously erupted between security forces and workers opposed to a far-reaching restructuring of the industry being imposed from Paris.

The entire region is becoming a social tinderbox. Peters’ predecessor, Labour’s Nanaia Mahuta, in a July 2022 interview sounded alarm about unrest in the Pacific amid geo-strategic tensions. Pointing to the explosive movement of the working class and rural poor amid Sri Lanka’s social and economic breakdown, Mahuta urged that the “lessons” about the consequences of economic “vulnerability” had to be learned, and warned of the need to prepare for future military interventions.

New Caledonia is on the agenda of the PIF summit next month with the local powers, Australia and New Zealand, likely playing a key role in deliberations. In Paris, the pro-independence lobby will be seeking the support of the rightward-moving NFP for a negotiated “solution” to the crisis. Whatever the outcome, nothing will be done to alleviate the underlying social crisis that is fuelling the ongoing rebellion.



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