

French PM abandons New Caledonia's contentious voting reform

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New Caledonia's contentious constitutional reform, which triggered violent unrest after a vote in the French National Assembly in May, will not now go ahead according to French Prime Minister Michel Barnier.

Delivering his inaugural speech on October 1 outlining the incoming right-wing government's agenda, Barnier said the constitutional amendment endorsed by both the Senate and National Assembly "will not be submitted to the Congress." The Congress, a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament, is required for the measure to be enacted.

The change to voting eligibility at New Caledonia's local elections was the immediate trigger for months of riots. The move was designed to "unfreeze" the current electoral roll, which only allows people born in the colony or residing there before 1998 to vote. The change meant recent residents, up to 25,000 people largely from France, would gain voting rights. Indigenous Kanaks feared the move would further marginalise them politically as they face worsening economic and social conditions.

French President Emmanuel Macron initially declared that due to France's snap elections, held in June and early July, the measure would be "suspended" but not withdrawn. While New Caledonia's pro-independence parties were demanding clarifications from Macron, the political impasse fuelled tensions. Widespread unrest, largely by the colony's alienated Kanak youth, intensified despite a brutal police-military crackdown by the French state.

The decision to withdraw the amendment was clearly taken at the highest level to buy time to engage the various factions of New Caledonia's political establishment, including the pro-independence parties, to negotiate a way to still meet the requirements of French imperialism.

Barnier confirmed that the territory's provincial elections, initially scheduled by mid-December, will be postponed until late 2025. He also announced that a "concertation and dialogue" mission consisting of French MPs from the National Assembly and Senate, plus officials from the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Overseas, would travel to Nouméa to begin talks.

Paris is demanding that the ongoing uprising be brought to heel—and that the official pro-independence leaders play a role. Macron has repeatedly insisted on a "full restoration of law and order" as the precondition for a return to the negotiating table.

Ahead of the visit, due next week, Overseas Minister François-Noël Buffet said he would hold discussions with New Caledonia's "key players, including in the political, economic and social areas," to reaffirm "our government's will to bring fast and pragmatic responses to the crisis this territory is going through."

Macron will then host New Caledonia's political "stakeholders" in Paris next month for negotiations with both pro-independence and pro-France parties to find a successor political agreement to the 26-year-old Nouméa Accord, signed in 1998.

The accord, which ended a decade of civil war, set up a "power-sharing" mechanism that established a series of referenda on independence while creating a privileged layer of indigenous business and political leaders to help administer the territory and forestall any further rebellions.

Barnier, installed by Macron to lead France's far-right government, has previously sided with anti-independence "Loyalists" in the territory, who applauded his appointment. During the elections, fascistic Rassemblement National (RN) leader Marine Le Pen, who openly demanded that Barnier accommodate the RN platform, bluntly declared that New Caledonia was "French" and would not see independence for "30 or 40 years."

Visiting Nouméa in July 2023, Macron underscored France's geo-strategic aims amid the escalating US-led build-up to war against China. He bluntly demanded that those seeking "separatism" accept the result of the third and final independence referendum, pushed through in December 2021 despite a boycott by the independence movement, which saw a 96 percent vote in favour of remaining with France.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on October 6, Hippolyte Sinewami

Htamuma, a Kanak chief of the La Roche district, provided an insight into the deep social roots of the uprising.

Condemning recent police killings of three activists in the Saint Louis area, Htamumu declared “It’s only the Kanaks who are targeted. It’s only young people who are targeted.” Describing the social situation as “inhumane,” he said: “They’re young people who have stood up for the struggle, who believe in the fight, who have faith that tomorrow can be a better day.”

Htamumu emphasised: “Every day we are fed up, fed up of social inequality, fed up with the marginalisation of youth, of families who don’t have a job, that don’t even have the minimum.”

Referring to the colony as built on “stolen land,” Htamuma declared: “France caused all this. We are all victims of history.” Macron, he said, had already decided that New Caledonia must “remain French, and it’s here for its interests,” including the “Indo-Pacific axis,” and with the territory’s wealth—particularly its nickel reserves—“not for the population.”

The brutal police-military crackdown imposing “republican order” remains in place. Since the Paris Olympic games, the number of security personnel in the colony has escalated to some 7,000. Kanak villages such as Saint Louis, which are targeted as pockets of ongoing resistance, are subject to permanent roadblocks, body searches including children and police harassment.

The crisis has seen the death of 13 people—11 civilians and two French gendarmes—damage to over 800 businesses that have been burnt and looted, the loss of about 20,000 jobs and damage estimated at 2.2 billion Euros. According to the Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (ISSE), New Caledonia’s economic and social fabric has been brought “to its knees and to the brink of collapse.”

The vital nickel industry, facing competition from Indonesian suppliers, is also in sharp decline. Koniambo (KNS) recently began sacking 1,200 workers after failing to find a buyer. Operations were idled following an announcement in February that its financier, Anglo-Swiss Glencore, wanted out. Some 600 contractors have already lost their jobs. August figures for nickel exports were \$US36.7 million, compared with \$US193 million for the same month last year.

Jimmy Naouna of the Kanak Liberation Party (PALIKA), part of the “moderate” wing of the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), told the ABC he welcomed Paris’s move, saying dropping the reform bill and sending a “high level mission” was what the FLNKS leaders had been requesting “for the past six months.” PALIKA president Jean-Pierre Djaiwe told local media it was “an opportunity for New Caledonia’s partners to come back and

sit at the table to find a political agreement.”

Pro-France Calédonie Ensemble party leader Philippe Gomès, a member of a bipartisan delegation currently in Paris that welcomed the announcement, declared: “Now we have more time, this will bring hope to New Caledonians and allow us to start rebuilding the country.”

Talks on the territory’s long-term future are likely to be fraught. Loyalist MP in the National Assembly, Nicolas Metzdorf, criticised Barnier’s statements, saying they were “disconnected from reality” and did not “grasp the reality of the situation on the ground.” Les Loyalistes party leader Sonia Backès, another staunch supporter of the electoral reform, declared Barnier’s speech “did not address New Caledonia’s expectations.”

Any deals reached by the political elites in Paris and Nouméa will do nothing to resolve the fundamental issues behind the unrest triggered by poverty, inequality, unemployment and social desperation. The rebellion has brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory’s establishment, which includes the local government and the FLNKS.

Pacific governments are concerned that if the situation is not brought under control, unrest in New Caledonia could be a spark for protests and riots across the impoverished region, where living standards are being ground down by inflation.

Addressing the UN Decolonisation Committee last week, French Polynesia president Moetai Brotherson called on France to “finally co-operate” in creating a timeline for decolonization, including its Pacific territory centred on Tahiti. He warned the New Caledonia unrest “reminds us of the delicate balance that peace requires.”



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