

# New Caledonia's pro-independence movement splits

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Amid a spiralling political crisis in Paris, the turmoil in the French Pacific colony of New Caledonia, following months of rioting, has seen the four-party pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) splinter in the wake of separate party congresses.

In October, the now former French Prime Minister Michel Barnier abandoned the colony's contentious voting reform, initiated by President Emmanuel Macron, which triggered violent unrest after a vote in the French National Assembly in May. The constitutional amendment was designed to "unfreeze" the local electoral roll, giving recent residents voting rights. Indigenous Kanaks feared the move would further marginalise them politically as they face worsening economic and social conditions.

The FLNKS's fracturing comes after talks began with France's ousted far-right government. In mid-November the chairs of both French Parliament's upper and lower Houses, Yaël Braun-Pivet and Gérard Larcher, arrived in Nouméa for "dialogue and concertation" with "stakeholders" regarding the future of the territory. This followed a previous visit by a negotiating team led by Overseas Minister François-Noël Buffet.

The FLNKS parties embraced the talks while striving to keep a lid on the rebellion by Kanak youth that erupted from below and outside their control. Daniel Goa, retiring leader of Union Calédonienne (UC) admitted that during the riots there was "a perception" that calls coming from all political parties, including UC, were "not heeded" and the insurrection had gotten out of control. "Now we need to open [UC] to the youth. Now we got the message they have sent us," Goa said, adding it was "my mea culpa."

The FLNKS was formed in 1984, during a civil war against French colonial rule, led by a layer of educated Kanaks who radicalised while studying in France during the late 1960s. While the FLNKS's title proclaims it is "socialist," its objective has never been socialism but Kanak "independence" within the framework of the global capitalism.

The FLNKS was key to the signing of the "power sharing"

Matignon Accord (1988) and Nouméa Accord (1998). In line with similar political arrangements elsewhere, the nationalist leadership abandoned its struggle for independence, as well as its empty invocations of socialism, in return for a place in office and access to business opportunities and financial resources. It now collaborates in negotiations for a "solution" in New Caledonia that will meet the needs of French imperialism.

Last month two of the "moderate" components of the FLNKS, the Melanesian Progressive Union (UPM) and Kanak Liberation Party (PALIKA), declared they would distance themselves from the Front, saying they did not recognise themselves in the way the UC has been operating since last year and during the riots. UPM and PALIKA did not take part in the most recent FLNKS Congress in late August.

That congress, run by the majority "hard line" UC and Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien (RDO) parties, resolved that the UC-created Field Action Coordinating Cell (CCAT) would formally join FLNKS. Its leader Christian Téin—currently incarcerated in pre-trial jail in mainland France—was declared FLNKS president, filling a 20-year vacancy. Starting in late 2023, the CCAT organised demonstrations which were originally peaceful, led to the riots.

Announcing the UPM's withdrawal, leader Victor Tutugoro said the events beginning in May had "cast suspicion on our political project. What has happened is contrary to our values and everyone, in UC and in RDO, bears a responsibility." The UPM intends to continue promoting an "independence in partnership with France" and the concept of "shared sovereignty."

Following its congress last month, PALIKA leader Charles Washetine also confirmed that the party was "in withdrawal," saying, "the front, in its strategy... is drifting in a certain way towards methods that are condemnable. Today, it is populism that prevails. What we have seen is that FLNKS is [no] longer credible."

Washetine told the media that his party's priority was to

support New Caledonia's reconstruction and recovery plan and to participate in talks regarding the territory's political future, with the aim of arriving at a "comprehensive" agreement that would also involve both the French State and local political parties, including the pro-France "loyalists."

Responding to the splits, UC secretary-general Dominique Fochi said FLNKS is not a "tool" but a "national liberation movement" recognised as the official representative of the Kanak people. "This is the message we want to convey to New Caledonians, and... the French State," he declared. He insisted the FLNKS remained the only "interlocutor bearing the voice of the... anti-colonial movement regarding [New Caledonia's] political future."

Replacing Goa as UC's president is Emmanuel Tjiboau, 48, the son of FLNKS founder, the late Jean-Marie Tjiboau. Emmanuel Tjiboau was elected earlier this year as one of New Caledonia's two representatives in the French National Assembly amid a surge in the pro-independence vote during France's brutal police-military crackdown in the colony. He is reputedly a man of "dialogue and moderation," according to Radio NZ.

At its congress on November 24-25, the UC voted to adopt a "timeframe" for the road to independence. One of the milestones would be the signing of a "Kanak Agreement" by September 24 next year, the anniversary of the colony's annexation in 1853, which would mark the beginning of a five-year "transition period" to full sovereignty.

After this according to Tjiboau, a new phase of talks could then start to put in place what he termed "interdependence conventions" on New Caledonia's main powers such as defence, law and order, foreign affairs and currency. This could be in the form of a "shared sovereignty," he said, a concept also promoted by visiting French Senate President Larcher.

Among the pro-independence parties, references to "shared sovereignty," "independence in partnership," and "independence-association" are all being touted. The pro-France loyalists are proposing "internal federalism" (Le Rassemblement-LR party) or a "territorial federation" (Les Loyalistes). Whatever their differences, all envisage a continuing role for France, which has major geo-strategic interests in the region amid escalating global tensions and war.

Negotiations between the parties, pro-and anti-independence, and the French State were expected to begin in the next few weeks. However, the defeat of the government in Paris will reverberate in the colony. Before the no-confidence vote, Buffet warned: "Our overseas territories will pay the hard price. This will pause many crucial measures with a direct impact on their economic, social and environmental development."

New Caledonia faces an immediate crisis with the economy on its knees and an estimated €2.2 billion in damage. Over 600 businesses have been destroyed, making thousands of people jobless, and forcing companies to shut down. France's 2025 Appropriation Bill, containing emergency assistance and loans to the territory, is now effectively void.

During the French elections the "left" New Popular Front (NFP) coalition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon issued meaningless calls for "dialogue" and "consensus" over the colony's crisis. Any strengthening of the far-right parties in a new French government could well see talks abandoned. Fascistic Rassemblement National (RN) leader Marine Le Pen has bluntly declared that New Caledonia is "French" and will not see independence for "30 or 40 years."

The situation remains extremely fragile. The six-month overnight curfew was ended last week but public meetings, rallies and parades remain banned in the greater Nouméa area until December 20. France's High Commissioner Louis Le Franc—who faced demands for his dismissal over his authoritarian methods—has warned that should the "security" situation deteriorate, he "reserves the entire right and capacity to reintroduce earlier measures."

*Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan told Radio NZ on February 28 that roadblocks and barricades erected by Kanak rebels have mostly been taken down, and there is "a level of surface calm." But 6,000 French security forces remain deployed, backed up with armoured cars and helicopters, riot and anti-terrorist squads.

Whatever the outcome of the current impasse, nothing will be done to resolve the fundamental issues behind the unrest which was triggered by poverty, inequality, unemployment and social desperation. The rebellion brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory's establishment, including the local government and the FLNKS. That has not gone away.



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