

'We live in misery': New Caledonia's indigenous people fight for independence from France

Monday 5 November 2018, by [LEVY Kim](#), [SRINIVASAN Prianka](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2018).

As the country prepares for a referendum on 4 November, the scars of colonisation are still raw

Just over 16,700km from Paris, on the edge of the southwest Pacific Ocean, lies a little piece of France. In [New Caledonia](#), locals eat croissants for breakfast, crêpes for lunch and in the afternoons play pétanque in shady city squares. They drive on the right, speak fluent French and the outskirts of the capital Nouméa are dotted with hypermarchés.

But this far-flung outpost of Gallic life might not be officially French for much longer. On Sunday, residents of the cluster of islands will vote on their future in an [independence referendum](#). For the locals of mining town Thio, which lies two hours east of Nouméa, that moment cannot come soon enough.

Thio was once the shining jewel of France's Pacific colonial project. The state-run mining company, SLN, began its operations there in 1880, less than three decades after New Caledonia became an overseas territory of France.

But now its residents, who are predominantly New Caledonia's indigenous Kanaks, say economic gloom has fallen over their once powerful mining community. They hope this will change if the territory votes to cut ties with France.

"In Thio we have endured 165 years of exploitation. And we still live in misery," said Aurélien Calixte at a local rally for pro-independence activists.

The rally is attended by a few dozen people, who are there to listen to local leaders of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front, or FLNKS. The town is otherwise empty.

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"Look how we live today. If we were independent, we could receive the profits from the mine," said Calixte.

Some 175,000 Caledonians are expected to cast their vote in the referendum.

Polls suggest an overwhelming majority – between 69% and 75% – will vote against independence and that pro-independence strongholds in the north and on its satellite islands, regions where Kanak people are the majority, will not be enough to flip the largely French-loyalist south. If the vote does fail, the territory may be allowed to hold two further referenda over the next four years.

‘France has taken so much away’

For New Caledonia’s pro-independence activists, Thio is a symbol of France’s colonial economic dominance. The exploitation of its mountains was the central reason why 500 Kanak militants stormed the town 34 years ago, provoking a four-year civil war called “the Events” which left at least 80 people dead.

This violence triggered an exodus of non-Kanak residents from Thio, which gutted the village. Today, there are few shops, few farms and a population of just 2,500 people. Yet the mine remains.

Profits from Thio’s nickel mine have failed to enrich the town, despite New Caledonia being the third largest nickel producer in the world with markets in Canada, China and Europe.

Even though the state-owned mining company contends that some of its profits are returned to local communities and that 60% of its gross revenue remains in the territory, residents say that they have little evidence of this wealth. Thio’s rate of unemployment sits at 30%, and 97% of residents have not graduated from high school.

A peace treaty signed by the French state, French loyalists in New Caledonia and the FLNKS after the civil war promised a fairer distribution of the territory’s natural resources and began a process of decolonisation that will culminate in next week’s referendum.

“France has taken so much away, and our economic suffering remains,” Moindou said.

Even those who do not belong to New Caledonia’s indigenous population say they have been hurt by the French-run mine.

Christian Bull is a farmer from Thio and a descendant of New Caledonia’s early settlers who were sent by the French state to colonise the land. Bull is one of the few non-Kanak people who remained in Thio following the 1984 siege.

“Where is the money from the mine that can help us out of this dire situation?” he says. His small farm also serves as accommodation for the rare tourist passing through Thio, though he mainly welcomes out-of-town workers from the mine.

“The youth here have no other aspirations than to leave Thio and head to the capital Nouméa to make a living,” said Bull. But they often fail to succeed in the big city.

The capital offers luxuries not seen elsewhere in the region. Metropolitan French immigrants often enjoy a wage much higher here than their earnings in France; the salary of French civil servants, for instance, is almost two times higher in Noumea than in Europe.

When people say that New Caledonia has benefited from its colonial past, it is often Nouméa that people are thinking of. But for pro-independence leaders, Thio represents one of the territory’s hidden wounds that they are still trying to heal after a 30-year process of decolonisation.

“Thirty years is too short when we have lived 165 years under colonial rule,” says Odette Moindou, a politician in Thio and a pro-independence activist. “We haven’t had time to find our voice.”

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