

Kanaky / New Caledonia: A referendum that is far from a level playing field

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Within the next year the referendum on the self-determination of Kanaky / New Caledonia [1] must be held. This territory of the Pacific has been a French colony since 1853, and was re-registered in 1986 by the United Nations on the list of non-autonomous territories to be decolonized. The Kanaks have never accepted the spoliation of their lands and the denial of their culture.

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In 1988, the Matignon-Oudinot agreements put an end to a new revolt that had been crushed in the Ouvéa bloodbath, where 19 Kanaks were killed, some of them executed while they were prisoners. This agreement provided for a period of 10 years before the holding of a referendum on self-determination, but in 1998 the Nouméa agreement postponed the deadline until the end of 2018.

This agreement was signed by the independentists of the FLNKS [2] and the loyalists of the RPCR [3]. The French state is the third partner, supposed to accompany the establishment of the conditions of a possible independence and to ensure the application of the agreement.

22,780 Kanaks missing from the electoral registers

The Kanaks became a minority on their territory at the beginning of the 20th century. Eighty per cent of the population disappeared as a result of massacres and the plunder of their land, which led to malnutrition and deadly diseases imported by settlers. Since then, they have been kept in the minority by the immigration of French settlers, theorized in 1972 by Pierre Messmer, Prime Minister at the time, who said: “In the long term the demand of the indigenous nationalists will be avoided only if the communities who do not come from the Pacific represent a majority demographic mass.”

The Nouméa agreement provides that the electoral body of the referendum is restricted, comprising only people who arrived before 1998 and have 20 years of continuous residence and young people born in the territory and resident for 10 years. For more than a year, independentists have warned the state about the absence of many Kanaks from the referendum list. As the deadline approaches, the current list completely distorts the outcome of the vote: 22,780 Kanaks, out of 90,740 of voting age, do not appear on the electoral rolls.

The UN Special Committee on Decolonization ruled in in June this year that “it is essential to establish credible and transparent electoral lists in New Caledonia”. In less diplomatic terms: the list is not credible.

The pressure is rising

Under the pressure of the Rally of Independentists and Nationalists (RIN, which regroups practically all the pro-independence forces)), the committee of signatories responsible for monitoring the Nouméa agreement has just admitted the need to register on the electoral list 7,000 Kanaks living under customary civil law, people formerly governed by the Code de l'indigénat [4] and their descendants. Since 10,000 more Kanaks seem to be in the same situation, the sincerity of the vote is still far from being assured, even though the government has accepted that the revision of the electoral rolls be postponed beyond 31 December 2017 and that observers of the UN supervise the poll.

The mobilization of the independentists will continue, for the registration of all Kanaks, and over the wording of the question that will be asked during the referendum and the project of society. At present, each of the independentist parties is discussing these question in its own framework, but it will be necessary to have a firm and united position in the face of the government and the colonialists.

The colonialists are preparing for battle. The coming arrival of Manuel Valls at the head of a parliamentary mission to discuss the issue is part of this preparation. When he was Prime Minister, he dragged out the transfer of responsibilities provided for by the Nouméa agreement and did nothing to organize the registration of Kanaks on the referendum list. He has never hidden his wish to keep New Caledonia attached to France.

Information and support for the legitimate struggle of the Kanak needs to be developed.

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P.S.

* Translation IVP: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5267>

Footnotes

[1] Kanaky is the name given to their country by the indigenous Kanak population of New Caledonia.

[2] The FLNKS, Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front, was formed in 1984 and regroups the main pro-independence parties

[3] The RPCR, Rally for Caledonia within the Republic, was the extension of the RPR, the party of Jacques Chirac, French president from 1995-2007

[4] The Code de l'indigénat ("Native Code") was first established in 1887 in Algeria and subsequently extended to other French colonies. It gave a second-class status to France's colonial subjects, to whom it refused to grant the same rights as French citizens.