

French colonies. Kanaky-New Caledonia: Anything but Pacific

Friday 23 November 2018, by [McDONNELL Hugh](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2018).

Emmanuel Macron celebrated New Caledonia's vote to remain part of France as an indication of the Republic's strength. Yet France's continued control is based on a bloody history of repression against the independence movement.

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The French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia [went to the polls](#) on November 4 in a surprisingly close-fought vote on independence. The 56.4 percent for “no” against 43.6 percent for “yes” approximated to the ethnic and social division between the French settler community and the indigenous Kanak people. But the slimmer than expected margin of victory indicates that the future status of one of France's last remaining [colonies](#) is a question due to remain on the political agenda.

New Caledonia (also known as Kanaky) has seldom figured centrally in the consciousness of metropolitan France, beyond colonial interests active in the territory. This is even true of the radical tradition of French anti-colonialism from Jean-Paul Sartre to Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, or Michel Leiris. And yet, this territory was a quintessential focus of French imperialism, integrated into global capitalist circuits and a focal point of white settlement. Such issues have reemerged as the subtext of the divisions permeating the archipelago territory between the indigenous Kanak population and European settlers, as well as inhabitants of mainly Pacific-island or Asian heritage.

Colonialism might be, as [Emmanuel Macron](#) intoned last year, [“a crime against humanity.”](#) but for him the wound can be salved with timeworn clichés. The French president reacted to the poll by proclaiming the result “a sign of confidence in the Republic” and expressed his “pride that the majority of Caledonians chose France.” All sides should “look to the future” knowing that “the sole victor is the peace process that New Caledonia has been undergoing for thirty years, it is the spirit of dialogue.”

Opponents of secession — concentrated in the wealthier parts of the conglomeration of the capital, Nouméa — had counted on a victory of the order of 70–80 percent range to bury the independence question. Yet it is the independence side that has emerged with the wind in its sails; not least given that 1998's Nouméa Accord allows the holding of two more referenda before 2022. The broader question is how to provide for Kanak self-determination and equality, with or without full state sovereignty; and likewise, the hardening relations between the archipelago's communities, and the entrenched poverty that afflicts the Kanak and Oceanic peoples in particular. In the first round of last year's presidential election, New Caledonia voted 60 percent for either the conservative and unapologetic colonial nostalgist, François Fillon, or the far-right Front National's [Marine Le Pen](#). Abstention, however, reached 52 percent. This landscape of colonial obstinacy coupled with political

resignation or despondency must continue to be confronted if the above questions are to be resolved positively. Last week's vote settled nothing, then, in a polity fractured by the imperial past and present. Indeed, these tensions stem from a long history of struggle.

Punished

The territory's uncertain status derives from a long history of colonial settlement. Annexed by France in 1853 under Napoleon III, New Caledonia-Kanaky is best known as a penal colony and place of exile for political dissidents. Veterans of the Paris Commune of 1871 like Louise Michel languished here, as did prisoners from other colonies — [New Caledonians of Algerian descent](#) constitute an important community in the territory to this day. The primary impetus for the annexation of New Caledonia, however, was the contemporaneous Anglo-French battle for hegemony in the Pacific region. From the outset, France opted for the model of settler colonialism, premised on the gradual disappearance of the indigenous Kanaks and their replacement by a European population. In "France's Australia" the Kanaks would meet a similar fate to the Aborigines of that great landmass.

Those Kanaks who survived the French onslaught were driven from their land, held in closed reservations, and submitted to the "indigenous legal code" which deprived them of rights and remained in force until 1946. Besides promoting continued migration from France, other Europeans, Asians, and Polynesians were brought in or encouraged to migrate to provide labor for the colony, particularly with the takeoff of nickel mining. The expropriation of Kanak land was a particular catalyst for resistance. This took various forms, from refusal of labor and of Christianity, preservation of the Kanak languages and identity, localized revolts, to serious uprisings in 1878 and again in 1917. French repression followed the template for "pacification" in other colonies: burnt villages and harvests, execution of prisoners, deportation of chiefs and tribes.

This political order ended in 1946, allowing Kanaks freedom of movement and releasing them from compulsory labor. A degree of autonomy was extended to the territory in the postwar years. However, this was reined in after France's ignominious exit from its [Algerian colony](#) in 1962. Unperturbed by the recent mass exit of European settlers from Algeria, and with an eye to the territory's nickel reserves, the long-standing policy of settlement was continued.

The independence struggle ignited in the 1970s, drawing on native traditions of resistance but also strongly rooted in the historical conjuncture of that decade from which emerged the Front for Kanak and Socialist Liberation (FLNKS) in 1984. Important factors included the return of Kanak students from university studies in France, imbued with the spirit of 1968; a boom in nickel production which both drove and drew attention to greater inequality and polarization; the repression of peaceful Kanak claims and subsequent radicalization of its militants, often in prison; and the example of the accession to independence of a string of Pacific colonies: Western Samoa in 1962, Nauru in 1968, Tonga and Fiji in 1970, Papua New Guinea in 1975, Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands in 1978, Kiribati in 1979, and Vanuatu in 1980.

As well as the stick of repression, France also wielded the carrot to contain the growing tide of secessionist feeling. President Giscard d'Estaing made provisions for increased autonomy and laid plans for long-term economic and social development. Rejecting these gestures, Kanak nationalists cultivated international support from the non-aligned movement and states in the region opposed to France's ongoing nuclear tests in the South Pacific. A mission was sent to the UN Special Committee on Decolonization, while both the French Communist Party and the French Socialists recognized New Caledonia's right to self-determination.

Once François Mitterrand won the presidency in 1981, however, such commitments were quickly jettisoned. Against the backdrop of French government indifference, colonists adopted a strategy of tension that saw the murder of the independence leader of the Caledonian Union, Pierre Duclercq, in September 1981. This marked the opening of a sequence of anti- and pro-independence demonstrations and actions.

Fudging his previous commitments, Mitterrand dropped any talk of a referendum on self-determination, proposing the “Lemoine statute” — as a framework to deliver a constitutional solution to the “Kanak identity problem” — to be approved by elections in November 1984. The FLNKS was unwilling to dilute its claim to independence, however, and it called for a boycott of the poll, which was widely heeded by the Kanak community. In a highly symbolic act, furthermore, independence leader Éloi Machoro took an axe to a ballot box. This was to reject France’s pose as a neutral mediator, and to insist that in a situation of settler colonialism talk of a democratic vote is a cynical neutralization of structural violence and appropriation.

Lest this be confused with discourse today rejecting the enfranchisement of immigrants in say, the US, Kanak independence leaders could point to the work of Fanon, whose Third Worldist writings were incorporated into their movement. In particular they drew on his emphasis on structural equality, in the understanding that “the settler, from the moment the colonial context disappears, has no longer any interest in remaining or in co-existing.” The question of the composition of the electorate in New Caledonia-Kanaky has continually shifted and remained a key point of controversy down to last week’s vote. Already in the 1980s, Kanak independence leaders indicated clearly their wish to include other “victims of history” — i.e., those deported to the penal colony, indentured laborers, and the like. France and the settler bloc have, however, endeavored to elide this category ever wider to incorporate European settlers who have continued to arrive — not *en masse*, but steadily and surely — into the present.

Across this period, French government arrests of Kanak leaders and activists spurred campaigns for the release of political prisoners as well as European vigilante attacks. On December 5, 1984 at Hienghène, ten Kanaks were killed, including two brothers of the pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou — an ordained Catholic priest who abandoned his initial vocation for Kanak political and cultural activism. The seven Europeans responsible for the killing were cleared in court by an all-white jury.

Commenting on the verdict, Tjibaou feared that “it’s open season on Kanaks.” From the end of 1984 until 1988, New Caledonia was beset with violence termed “the events,” pitting security forces and European vigilantes against Kanaks, and during which Kanak leaders, including Machoro, were assassinated. For the first time since the Algerian War of 1954–62, a state of emergency and a curfew were put in place on French territory, in fact facilitating European attacks against pro-independence militants. By 1988 the territory was inundated with French soldiers and police — with one for every seven Melanesians.

Given the balance of forces, Kanak actions were most limited to the symbolic. But a botched raid on a police station led to the killing of four policemen, and the taking hostage of others at the Ouvéa cave at the height of the May 1988 French presidential election. Despite overtures for negotiation, French forces stormed the holdout. Under the glare of the media, nineteen Kanaks were killed, three of whom died in custody after surrendering, as well as two French policemen. This bloody culmination to “the events” led to the Matignon Accord the same year, sealed with a strained handshake between Tjibaou and Jacques Lefleur — leader of the loyalist (pro-French) Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République and key figure in the business community.

Each side considered the agreement a means to achieve their respective pro- and anti-independence

positions. And while it extended amnesty to Kanak prisoners, it also granted impunity to military assassins. The text promised to redress the nation's ethnically based economic imbalances, the restitution of customary lands, promotion of the Kanak culture, preparation of a future New Caledonian elite, initiation of rural development activities, and made provisions for another referendum in 1998. For Tjibaou's resolution to demilitarize the conflict he was assassinated by a discontented Kanak militant.

The Nouméa Accord prolonged this logic of mutual compromise borne not of consensus but whereby each side saw an opportunity to consolidate its respective pro- or anti-independence positions. Significantly, though, this new agreement recognized for the first time "the shadows of the colonial period" and addressed the need for "rebalancing" and "soft decolonization" towards a "common destiny" shared by Kanaks, Europeans, and those of Oceanic, Asian, and other heritage. New Caledonia-Kanaky's political institutions were granted increased autonomy, and a referendum on the question of independence was set for no later than 2018.

Unfulfilled Promises

How has the political terrain shifted since the Nouméa accord, and how did this manifest itself in the November 4 poll? In the first instance, there have been significant, if limited, developmental and educational initiatives to promote greater Kanak inclusion. Proponents of French loyalty, by the same token, maintain that the accord Nouméa ushered in a peace dividend — manifested in impressive figures for economic performance post-1998, with average annual growth of 4 percent — which is unnecessarily put at risk by separatist tendencies. A sharp downturn since 2015, however, exposed this success, such as it was, as owing to contingent and un-reproducible factors: a triple credit bubble in raw materials, property, and state transfers — largely due to the passage of France to the euro thereby preempting devaluation.

The economic boom, furthermore, deepened already glaring ethnic and geographical inequalities. While opulent parts of Nouméa could be mistaken for the French Riviera, 10,000 of the capital's inhabitants live in shantytowns in areas like Nouville, where convicts once disembarked. Inequality and poverty are twice as high as in metropolitan France. Unemployment for non-Kanak's is 7 percent as against 26 percent for Kanaks, who are also much more unlikely to occupy senior positions or have completed high school or university education. Kanak poverty is exacerbated by the high prices that characterize the local economy, not only as a factor of the necessity to import, but because of distortions in the commercial and distribution sectors. Indeed, the economy is calibrated to what has been termed an "oligopoly of collusion," whereby it is divvied up and coordinated between a handful of families of the settler bourgeoisie. The sharp limitations of the development model of New Caledonia-Kanaky since 1998 certainly fed into the strong showing of the "yes" vote but was also insufficient to carry it.

Nor can this failure be attributed to the demographic issue alone, although certain sectors of the Kanak independence movement — notably the Labour Party — called for a boycott in light of what they maintain is a settler-loaded electoral list. There is also a certain perception that Kanak leadership has grown stale, that its case is not sufficiently persuasive to offset advantages that come from association with France, or that the country is insufficiently prepared for independence, however desirable. Economic marginalization has also deflected from as much as it has fed into the independence movement. The sheer struggle to get by has had an atomizing effect that has either detached Kanaks from political struggle, or discontent with the crisis of the cost of living has become disarticulated from demands for secession.

These material conditions connect to broader questions about (neo)colonialism and imperialism, the particularities of New Caledonia-Kanaky's position and the challenges of delinking as a small territory. France's discursive and material resources to blunt the independence movement should not be underestimated, however inadequate these have been to significantly improve the lives of most Kanaks. French republicanism's homogenizing rhetoric, rehashed by Macron after the result, belies the malleability of different territories over time. In the case of New Caledonia-Kanaky, the French establishment has long preferred that it should be autonomous within the Republic, upholding imperial interests whilst garnering prestige from gesturing to the eschewal of the colonial past.

Conversely, the Kanak call for resource nationalism is not wholly convincing. This has often taken the form of preference for non-French, international mining interests, while trying to ameliorate exploitation through more favorable terms and drawing on resources of Kanak tradition in fostering environmental concern, decolonial thought, and a sense of the common. Immanuel Wallerstein often points to the emergence of a cleavage in developmental models in the world periphery between an emphasis on growth and one of "living well," which de-emphasizes the former and stresses instead the need to live sustainably and harmoniously with the environment and the promotion of community values.

New Caledonia-Kanaky would seem to be a prototype of this kind of dilemma, but with even less leverage than countries, such as the Pink Tide governments of Latin America, that Wallerstein has foremost in mind. Kanak nationalists' preference for non-French capital as a basis for resource nationalism might yield short-term favorable terms for mining. But it is not clear that eschewing specific French imperialism and submitting to imperialism in its general sense — characterized by the concentration and centralization of capital on a global scale and by the thriving of finance capital, uneven development, and a hierarchy of countries — is a good bet. This is certainly a concern of many Kanaks, who are little inspired by the postindependence progress of neighboring territories like Vanuatu, or who are aware of the widely fluctuating world market for raw materials and the lack of local financial infrastructure to promote the nickel industry in more equitable ways.

Finally, the New Caledonia-Kanaky referendum has revealed strains in France's model of governance of its thirteen inhabited overseas territories, spread over the globe. Last year saw significant opposition movements in [Guiana](#), while this year the scandal of stolen children from the French Indian ocean territory of Réunion has resurfaced. While the republican motto of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" is not without appeal to inhabitants of these territories, the perennial question of how it can be reconciled with dependence, asymmetrical power, and racism will not go away.

These dilemmas will no doubt be thrashed out between now and 2022, before which time New Caledonia-Kanaky is to hold two more independence referenda. Perhaps this time frame will be to the advantage of Kanak activists in the patient work of giving concrete form to decolonial and emancipatory politics and setting out a meaningful "common destiny," building on the successes and failures of its decolonizing forerunners. As Bernard Maépas, president of the council of tribal elders, put it on the eve of this month's vote: "if we're not independent on Sunday, we're in no rush. We've been here for more than three thousand years. I don't have a watch, like the people in Nouméa, but time, that I do have."

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 11.21.2018:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/11/new-caledonia-france-independence-colonialism-referendum>
- Hugh McDonnell holds a PhD in history from the University of Amsterdam.