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FRANCE - ANALYSIS

New Government (France) - The anger over downgrading of France's overseas territories ministry

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By downgrading the ministry for France's overseas territories to junior status, now under the authority of the interior minister in France's new government, President Emmanuel Macron has dismayed many Members of Parliament for the territories, but also a number of senior civil servants. Meanwhile, the political situation in the islands of the French Caribbean and the Pacific archipelago of New Caledonia threatens to reach a crisis point. Ellen Salvi reports.

Outlining in Parliament her new government's policy plans last week, French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne gave just a few words and broad generalities on the subject of France's overseas territories.

"For the moment, we're left hungry for more," said Justin Daniel, a political sciences lecturer at the University of the French Antilles, commenting on her July 6th speech. It did little to reassure those in France's overseas populations whose distrust of the French government and the policies of President Emmanuel Macron has, as demonstrated in this year's election results, become significant.

Borne recognised what she called the "doubts", the "fears", and the "anger" which have been demonstrated over recent months in the country's Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and also in the Indian Ocean island territories of La Réunion and Mayotte, where, during April's presidential elections, and despite Macron's re-election to a second term, far-right leader Marine Le Pen garnered a majority of votes. "I call on all of my government to give the greatest attention towards the overseas territories," Borne told the National Assembly.

But her presentation hardly convinced the Members of Parliament (MPs) from overseas territories present that day. "It was a quite ecological speech because, like wind turbines, it churned out a lot of air," was the sarcastic reaction from Frédéric Maillot, an MP from La Réunion. He belongs to the Pour La Réunion party (PLR), which is part of the new French leftwing parliamentary alliance, the NUPES. Speaking to public broadcaster [La Première](#), he said the decision, in the formation of Borne's new government, to downgrade the ministry for France's overseas territories, making it a junior ministry under the authority of the interior minister, showed a "lack of consideration", a sentiment similarly voiced by others among his parliamentary colleagues from La Réunion and the Caribbean.

In Borne's first government, in place between May 16th and July 4th, Yaël Braun-Pivet was a stand-alone minister for the French overseas territories. However, in late June she was elected as

president the National Assembly, following which the ministry was downgraded. While it is not the first time this has happened – it was also the case under Nicolas Sarkozy’s 2007-2012 presidency, and on several other occasions over previous decades – it broke with a continuity that had most recently lasted ten years, and has angered many.

“Since Nicolas Sarkozy, it had never been done again,” said Victorin Lurel, a socialist senator from Guadeloupe, who served as minister for overseas territories from 2012-2014, speaking in an interview with *France Info* radio station. “We thus come back to a previous status quo, with probably a form of contempt on display. I say this very clearly, it is a bad signal that is being sent to us.” He said the move to downgrade the ministry resembled a “punishment” after what he called “the thrashing” Macron received in the first and second rounds of the presidential elections.

“A historic step backwards for the overseas territories: no longer a senior minister but [*one that is*] under the leadership of the minister of the interior,” [tweeted Karine Lebon](#), a Réunionese MP, also part of the NUPES alliance, reacting to the makeup of the new government announced on July 4th. “What message is being sent to the overseas population? Please do not disturb? The contempt continues...”

While interior minister Gérald Darmanin, in the post since July 2020, has been given the overall responsibility for the overseas territories, the new junior minister is Jean-François Carencu, a senior civil servant and a former prefect of La Guadeloupe. Darmanin also has authority over the new junior minister for local elected authorities, Caroline Cayeux, and a new secretary of state for citizenship, Sonia Backès, both of whom will have a role to play in the overseas territories.

For quite different reasons, the makeup of this governmental team has raised concerns among the overseas territories, including from some within the state apparatus who cited the “incoherence” of the new appointees. One example is the controversy over the choice of Backès, who is on the hard-right of the conservative party in the semi-autonomous French south-west Pacific territory of New Caledonia.

Beginning in 2009, Backès, 46, has served in several posts in the archipelago’s local government, and for the past three years has been president of the local assembly of its South Province, a post she intends to keep despite her promotion to the French government. She is outspokenly against the independence movement in New Caledonia, which is largely led by the indigenous Kanak people, and notably by the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front, the FLNKS.

The issue is deeply divisive. After a bitter and bloody campaign for independence in the 1980s, it reached a crisis point in 1988 [with a hostage-taking of French gendarmes by Kanak rebels](#), which ended with the deaths of 19 rebels and two gendarmes. Soon after, in an effort to defuse the volatile situation, the so-called “Matignon-Oudinot Agreements” were concluded in Paris in the summer of 1988, which were the first to give economic and institutional rights to the Kanak population, and which paved the way for the 1998 Nouméa Accord, which handed greater political power to Kanak representatives, set in train further devolved powers and established a roadmap for a referendum on self-determination.

Alain Christnacht, a senior French civil servant and a former High Commissioner to New Caledonia, who was closely involved in the 1988 and 1998 agreements, questioned the potential political conflicts of interest now facing Backès: “Will she participate in the local discussions about the future for New Caledonia [...] in her capacity as president of the South Province, in the ‘loyalist’ camp, or as a representative of the state alongside the junior minister for overseas territories?” he asked [in a post](#) on Facebook.

Interior minister Darmanin, speaking during a visit to La Réunion last Friday, his first trip overseas since taking up his extended responsibilities, confirmed he would next travel to New Caledonia on July 26th, accompanied by junior minister Jean-François Carenco, for consultations about the future of the archipelago. The political process there has largely come to a halt since a referendum on self-determination was held on December 12th last year.

That was the last of three referendums, as allowed under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, in which voters were asked "Do you want New Caledonia to gain its full sovereignty and become independent?". In the first two referendums, held in 2018 and 2020, there was a majority "No" vote (respectively, 56.4% and 53.26%). Ahead of the referendum last December, Kanak pro-independence organisations called for a boycott of the vote. Despite that, and the Covid-19 crisis in the territory, President Emmanuel Macron controversially [chose to go ahead](#) with it, when less than 44% of the electorate turned out and the "No" vote won again, this time by a thumping 96%. "It is necessary to establish what conclusion can be made after that third referendum," said Darmanin last week, in an interview with BFMTV.

But before the discussions on the institutional future of New Caledonia pick up again, the appointment of Sonia Backès has added further disorder to the reigning confusion. "One ends up forgetting that we should be proud of having a Caledonian over there [*in government in Paris*], but because it has come about in a moment in history when one needs clarity, it necessarily poses a problem," said Louis Mapou, the first pro-independence Kanak politician to become president of the local government of New Caledonia, in an interview with broadcaster La Première.

Backès, née Dos Santos, the grand-daughter of Portuguese emigrants and who, in the second-round playoff in France's 2017 presidential elections, refused to choose between Macron and the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, has built her political career as an opponent of independence. "Me, I didn't colonise anyone, my parents didn't colonise anyone," she once declared, in what amounted to a denial of the archipelago's history. More recently, in [an interview](#) with French daily *Le Figaro* in January this year, in which she lauded the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, she said that "at the end of the period of transition, even if the right to self-determination persists, we will ask that the state makes a request to the United Nations to remove New Caledonia from the [list of non-self-governing territories](#)".

The new junior minister for France's overseas territories, Jean-François Carenco, 70, served as secretary-general of France's High Commission in New Caledonia between 1990-1991, when he is said to have had cordial relations with pro-independence figures, and sometimes rough relations with the anti-independence side. "Backès and Carenco represent two opposing ideologies," commented one well-informed source, who described the move to pair them as "Machiavellianism".

A former prefect of France's north-west Atlantic territory of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, between 1996-1997, and later prefect of La Guadeloupe, between 1999-2002, Carenco is a high-profile figure within the sphere of France's senior civil servants. His appointment to government was welcomed by numerous local politicians in the French Caribbean islands, where the Guadeloupian Socialist Party federation described him as "a senior civil servant of quality, with a reputation as being a good connoisseur of our territories".

While some of those questioned by Mediapart have regarded the downgrading of the minister for overseas territories to junior status as a move to keep the former prefect in check, but others regard giving the interior minister, with his self-styled emphasis on law and order, the overall authority for the overseas territories as a highly significant political signal. "It confirms that Guadeloupe is a colony," commented Élie Domota, a Guadeloupian trades union leader and spokesman for the political movement Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon (creole for the "Collective against exploitation").

Domota, who was a leading figure in the 2009 general strike in Guadeloupe, and who also played an important role in the widespread [civil unrest in the French Antilles in 2021](#), underlined that it was Darmanin who decided to send the elite special units of the police and gendarmerie, respectively the RAID and GIGN, to quell the troubles last year. “We have been mobilised since July 17th 2021, but nobody answers us, nobody receives us,” he told Mediapart. “The only response from the state is repression.”

“The profile of the minister of the interior indeed causes concerns,” said Justin Daniel, political sciences lecturer at the University of the French Antilles and who is also president of Martinique’s economic, social, environmental, cultural and educational council, the Césécem. “There is an emotion, given the current situation which remains extremely tense in some territories [...] In the [French] Antilles, one has the impression of reliving the system of repression that we experienced before the 1980s.”

Daniel said that while the downgrading of the overseas territories ministry “can appear, locally, like a form of recolonisation”, the ministry had previously been given different statuses since the creation in 1958 of the Fifth Republic, and that none in reality changed its position within government. “All that has only a symbolic value,” he said. “What counts is the weight of the overseas territories ministry in the governmental line-up. It has always been quite weak.” He underlined the apparent indifference shown by France’s economy ministry towards the very particular problems experienced in the territories.

Speaking on July 5th, following the formation of Borne’s new government, Darmanin commented: “What the president and prime minister wanted was to have an extremely strong weight in face of Bercy [*the economy and finance ministry*], notably in face of inter-ministerial difficulties.” During an interview the next day on BFMTV, he said: “What is certain is that the ministry of the interior from now on should not be regarded as that of law and order, it is the ministry for the protection of the French people in the broad sense.”

But beyond the clout he wields in government, the eventual weight he may have in future negotiations, and his closeness to Emmanuel Macron, there is nothing in his track record that is likely to reassure France’s overseas populations. That is true of his vision of law and order – his [handling of the policing fiasco](#) during the Champions League final in Paris [severely damaged his reputation](#) – and his courting of the far-right, which included his comment, during a TV debate earlier this year with far-right leader Marine Le Pen, that she was “softer” than him.

Behind the different social, economic, institutional and environmental issues which face the French overseas territories, each in their own specific manner, lies the same political danger. For Justin Daniel, the successful scores in these territories of Le Pen in the second round of April’s presidential elections is above all “a massive rejection of the French president and his way of dealing with local issues”, while also “a degree of adhesion” to the policies of her Rassemblement National party (the former Front National).

“In Martinique, I see frightening slogans appearing on the walls, like ‘Haitians out’,” he added. “There is a risk of things taking root in minds if we don’t rapidly react.” He argues that the situation in the French Caribbean islands, where he said “the state is regarded as a foreign body which is not planted in the real”, speaks volumes about Macron’s executive, a political power with “a very vertical posture”.

Ellen Salvi

P.S.

- Mediapart. JULY 11, 2022:

<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/110722/anger-over-downgrading-france-s-overseas-territories-ministry>

The original French version of this report can be found [here](#).

Ellen Salvi's articles on Mediapart :

<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/ellen-salvi-0>

- English version by Graham Tearse.