

New Caledonia: a return of colonialism through the back door

Saturday 25 May 2024, by [FOUTEAU Carine](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2024).

A sixth person was on Saturday reported to have been killed in the ongoing unrest in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia, amid increasing calls for Emmanuel Macron and his government to place on hold the legislation that sparked the violence. This will give newly arrived settlers, mostly European, on the South Pacific archipelago the right to vote in local elections, whereas until now the electoral register was frozen in order that the indigenous Kanak people maintain their political representation. In this analysis of the crisis, Mediapart publishing editor Carine Fouteau says that an almost four-decade-long process of decolonization is now at a crossroads, and at stake is the survival of the Kanak people who have been gradually turned into a minority under French domination since the mid-19th century.

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Behind the chaos in New Caledonia there has been a lack of consultation and consideration. There has been the forceful passage of legislation, in the French parliament. All of which has culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency, curfews, and the dispatching to the archipelago of troops and the GIGN and Raid police tactical units.

While six people have been killed and numerous others injured in the clashes this past week in and around the capital Nouméa, the French government has been sucked into a spiral of violence which it has proved incapable of defusing, and which has even contributed to its resurgence.

The use of live ammunition against a backdrop of torched buildings and vehicles, roadblocks and looting, brings back the spectre of the civil war in New Caledonia that was seen the 1980s. That was between the pro-independence camp and their opponents, the “loyalists”, and which reached a climax in May 1988 with the [Ouvéa Island cave massacre](#) in which 19 Kanak militants and, in total, four French gendarmes were killed. Then already, the issue of the electoral system was at the heart of what is hypocritically dubbed as “the events”.

Through its offhand manner and its lack of preparation, such as history appears to now repeat itself, the government has made France take the risk of reducing to ashes a 40-year patient process of decolonization, and which until this point had allowed, in a skilful apprenticeship by the forces present, to keep civil peace in New Caledonia. Some, including officials, had long hoped that that process would symbolize France’s first successful – meaning non-violent – decolonization.

Kanaks demonstrate in the New Caledonian capital Nouméa, on April 13th 2024, in protest at the proposed reform of the electoral register. The slogan on the T-shirt reads: "No to the unfreezing of the electoral register - The future of the country will not be written against us, nothing will happen without us." © Photo Nicolas Job / Sipa

But today, the exchange and balance with which a common destiny was being built in New Caledonia appears broken, despite the many calls for calm from both the loyalist and pro-independence camps.

Emmanuel Macron carries the responsibility, given the accumulation of errors committed by the executive. Instead of listening to the warnings issued for months now by the pro-independence camp over the consequences of the enlargement of the electorate, which threatens to marginalize the Kanaks in the archipelago's provincial assemblies, the executive chose to treat them with contempt. Instead of keeping alive the necessary dialogue, however complex that might be, the government decided to force its project through in the French parliament.

Instead of understanding the gravity of the moment, learning the lessons of the past, the president refuses to introduce a pause in the disputed reform, instead announcing a state of emergency - which was written into law in 1955 during "the events" in another French colony, Algeria - and send in troops.

Reopening wounds

After having fuelled the chaos, he promises an "implacable" response to the unrest in the streets. Hoping to give himself a better image than that created by the brutality of his strategy, Emmanuel Macron has now "invited" delegations from the different New Caledonian camps for talks in Paris, but he has also insisted that he will maintain the meeting of parliament's Congress in Versailles, when it will vote on the new legislation, "before the end of June". The Congress consists of all the members of the lower and upper houses of parliament (respectively, the National Assembly and the Senate) which meets to approve or disprove proposed measures that affect the constitution. If no compromise is reached before then, this would set in stone the change to the electoral register in New Caledonia - an ultimatum that those concerned are not certain to appreciate.

Interior minister Gérald Darmanin put it in his own, less polished manner: "The [*French*] Republic will not tremble," he said on Wednesday when paying tribute to the gendarmerie officer who died in this week's unrest in the archipelago after being shot in the head, without a word for the other victims. "Yes to dialogue, as the prime minister has said, as much as is needed, where it is needed and with whoever is needed, but the Republic must never tremble in face of Kalashnikovs."

However, given its involvement in the process of decolonization, the French state should know that one cannot with impunity put an end to a heritage of conquest, subservience and resentment without also doing away with the brutal and expeditive methods that shaped the past.

Far from what he expected, the French president has painfully reopened the wounds of a history of domination that had never completely ended, despite several decades of negotiations. They notably began with the 1988 "Matignon accords" in Paris which followed the Ouvéa cave tragedy, and which were held under the auspices of the French prime minister, bringing together a Kanak pro-independence delegation and another of the anti-independence loyalists. Those negotiations, centred on improving the economic condition and institutional representation of the Kanaks, were followed ten years later by the Nouméa accord of 1998, which set a timetable for holding a referendum on independence and agreed to devolve a number of powers to the local government. It was also when,

for the first time, the preamble to the final, agreed text officially recognised France's colonial role.

That accord manifested a shared desire "to turn the page of violence and contempt in order to together write pages of peace, solidarity and prosperity", as it was officially worded. It appears, given the present situation, that the current French government forgot to read the page to the end before turning it. For even if the "no" vote won the majority in the three referendums on independence that have been held in New Caledonia since 2018, the process of decolonization is not completed, however much the government would like to believe it so. For according to what has been said and written, an overall agreement about the institutional future of this South Pacific archipelago - which the United Nations continues to consider is a non-autonomous territory that should be decolonized - is yet to be concluded.

It is not possible to get rid of a colonial substratum without recognising it for what it is. In a territory where the inhabitants and institutions have demonstrated a collective intelligence and the ability to reach reasonable compromises, the managerial handling and policing of the issues in New Caledonia is bound not only to fail, but also to lead to dramatic events.

"Biased state - sacrifice of a people" reads the graffiti on gates in Nouméa, May 15th 2024. © Photo Nicolas Job / Sipa

"The time will come when the desire to dominate, to dictate one's law, to build one's empire, the pride in being the strongest, the arrogance of being the one who knows the truth, will be considered as one of the most certain signs of barbarity at work in the history of humanity." That sentence, written in [a joint work](#) by the late French philosopher, writer and poet Édouard Glissant and fellow Martiniquan author Patrick Chamoiseau, should reverberate in the ears of Emmanuel Macron. Written in 2007, the subject was not New Caledonia but a reference to the sinister debate in France about "national identity", and which in retrospect one can recognise to what degree it reactivated the old racist matrixes.

The responsibility of the French president

How have we arrived at a point that might prove to be one of no-return? Viewed from the French mainland, Nouméa appeared to have gone up in flames overnight, as the parliamentary debates were reaching an end. But the anger had in fact been simmering over a long period. The major first fault of the French president was in 2021, when he insisted that the third and last referendum on independence should go ahead as planned, whereas the pro-independence camp had said they would boycott it. The reason was their request to postpone the vote until after the Kanak period of mourning for the victims of the Covid epidemic was refused. By dispossessing the vote of those the most concerned by the ballot, the poll was de facto void of all legitimacy.

With confidence having been lost, relations with the principal elements of the Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS), the alliance of pro-independence parties, became considerably fraught, preventing the resumption of talks on the institutional future of New Caledonia.

Then, in 2022, the appointment of Sonia Backès - the political spearhead of the New Caledonian rightwing loyalists - as a junior minister in the French government was regarded by the pro-independence camp as clear evidence of a lack of impartiality. More recently, their wrath has been directed at interior minister Gérald Darmanin, who has taken charge of the New Caledonia "dossier". That broke with the tradition of it being led by the prime minister's office. Darmanin's political manoeuvres are at odds with the search for consensus and crediting what has already

been pledged.

The final straw has come with the reform led by the interior minister. Since the constitutional revision in 2007, which resulted from the 1998 Nouméa accord, only those people who figured on New Caledonia's electoral register at the time of that accord (1998) were allowed to vote in elections for the provincial assemblies; this was an exemption under French law which was designed to attenuate the political force of new settlers, and to allow the indigenous Kanaks to be able to properly contribute to the decision-making process.

With no regard to that pledge, Darmanin, keen to turn the symbolic page of history, decided that the principle set in stone in 2007 was no longer "in conformity with the principles of democracy". After the refusal by Paris to postpone the third referendum out of respect for the Kanaks' post-Covid period of mourning, the unfreezing of the electoral register was seen by the pro-independence movement as the latest move to marginalize the Kanak people, who today represent just 41% of the total population of 271,000 in New Caledonia.

A question of survival

The issue is an existential one for the Kanaks. Without a demographic majority, their political destiny is no longer in their hands. The vast majority of them support independence, which is opposed by the heirs of white colonists, and New Caledonians of European origin in general, who largely favour remaining under French rule. Indeed, Kanaks have reason to be suspicious of the intentions of Paris in that France, from the moment it established itself in Oceania, followed a policy of colonization and replacement.

As of the France's annexation of the archipelago in 1853, on the order of Napoléon III, the despoilment of land, the forced transfers and forced labour of the indigenous population reduced their numbers. In a census carried out in 1921, the Kanak population totalled just 27,100, which represented 80% less than in 1774.

In the 1950s, following the end of the *indigénat* in 1946 (a system of discriminating, specific laws for the native populations of French colonies), and when decolonization movements were intensifying across the globe, France instead amplified its strategy of populating New Caledonia. After having deported convicts, [Paris Communards and Algerian rebels](#) there over the second half of the 19th century, the French authorities, post-WWII, decided that encouraging emigration to New Caledonia was essential to maintain the country's presence in the South Pacific region. Subsequently, in the 1970s and alongside the boom in demand for nickel, mined in the archipelago, a wave of "economic migrants" arrived, principally from the France-ruled islands of Wallis and Futuna, tipping the numbers of the Kanak population into a minority.

In a missive dated July 19th 1972, the then French prime minister Pierre Messmer was explicit about French policy: "The French presence in [New] Caledonia can only be threatened, apart from a world war, by a nationalist demand from the indigenous populations, supported by some eventual allies in other ethnic communities coming from the Pacific," he wrote. "In the short- and medium-term, massive immigration of French mainland citizens or from overseas départements [*editor's note: administrative regions equivalent to counties*] should allow to avoid this danger, by maintaining or improving the numerical ratio of communities. In the long-term, the indigenous nationalist demand will only be avoided if the communities that do not originate from the Pacific [*Ocean region*] represent a majority demographic mass." Which says everything.

However, at the same time, the demands of the Kanaks became so strong that the French state could

no longer ignore them. The pro-independence militants argued that apart from the Kanak people, those who they described as the “victims of history” – meaning the descendants of the deported who were forced by the colonial administration to live in the archipelago – should be authorised to have a say on the subject of the future of the territory.

The basis for negotiations over self-determination was laid in July 1983 at round-table discussions between the French government, the pro-independence camp, and that of the opposing loyalists, held at a château in the village of Nainville-les-Roches, south of Paris. As of that moment the issue of the electoral register was raised. It would continue to be posed thereafter, notably in 1988 but also in the first referendum on self-determination held in 2018, and up until today.

Carine Fouteau

P.S.

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