

New Caledonia rejects independence from France for second time

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The Pacific island territory of New Caledonia held a second referendum on independence from France on Sunday, following a previous plebiscite in 2018.

Just over 53 percent opted for the status quo, down on the 56 percent majority in the first referendum. Turnout was above 85 percent of the 180,000 enrolled, exceeding the 81 percent return in 2018. That referendum was marked by a surge in support by pro-independence indigenous Kanaks, defying polls that had forecast a 70-30 percent split.

A Yes vote would have initiated a limited transition period to transfer the remaining sovereign powers, relating to justice, defence, policing, monetary policy and foreign affairs.

The Southern Province, encompassing the capital Noumea, which is the most populous and richest, overwhelmingly voted against independence while the mainly Kanak Northern Province and the Loyalty Islands emphatically voted for independence. The Parti Travailiste and USTKE trade union confederation, which had called for “non-participation” in the 2018 referendum, campaigned for a Yes vote this time.

New Caledonia has been on the United Nations’ so-called “decolonisation” list since 1986, but this is resisted by the French ruling elite. With a major French military presence, it is strategically significant. As the US-led build-up against China has intensified, French influence is being boosted. The Pacific Islands Forum, which includes Australia and New Zealand, agreed in 2016 to admit New Caledonia and French Polynesia as members. France had been pushing for membership for its territories since 2003.

France’s ruling En Marche party called for a vote against independence, as did the Union des Democrates Indépendants (UDI) and Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Rally. Le Pen warned that a victory for

independence would lead to “uncertainty, danger and tears.” In a statement on the outcome, President Emmanuel Macron said that as head of state, he saluted the “show of confidence in the Republic” with a “profound feeling of gratitude.”

Under agreements signed as part of the Matignon Accord (1988) and Noumea Accord (1998), three referenda on independence were provided for. A third of legislators in the Congress are required to request the final plebiscite, which would be held in two years. Following elections in 2019, a grouping of anti-independence parties, with a minority of the popular vote, controls 28 Congress seats while pro-independence parties hold 26.

Voting for the referenda is restricted to indigenous Kanaks and residents who have lived in New Caledonia continuously since 1994. Another 40,000 adults can only vote in French and local council elections.

Sunday’s result will further entrench the deep social divisions between the largely impoverished Kanaks and the more privileged, mainly European, layers. Anti-independence proponents are already calling for New Caledonia’s formal re-integration into France under a new statute while Kanak leaders insist that independence is inevitable.

Roch Wamytan, a leading member of the largest independence party, Union Calédonienne, told the *Guardian* the independence campaign would continue to the next referendum, and beyond. “If the ‘no’ wins again in two years, we’ll get together, we’ll talk, and we’ll figure something out,” he said.

New Caledonia was established as a French colonial possession in 1853, and used as a penal colony. The indigenous Kanaks make up nearly 40 percent of the 271,000 population. The Kanaks were removed from their land, forced onto reservations and subject to the

Indignat, a code of ‘native regulations,’ which gave them inferior legal status. Uprisings occurred in 1878 and 1917.

Today Kanaks make up 95 percent of the unemployed and many low-paid workers live in slum conditions. Police clashes with Kanak youth have erupted with increasing violence, prompting demands by local politicians for harsher “law and order” measures.

Meanwhile, descendants of the original European settlers known as Caldoches, French public servants, military personnel and business employees occupy expensive residences overlooking the tourist beaches and yacht harbours.

A virtual civil war simmered throughout much of the 1980s. Tensions came to a head in 1988 when a group of Kanaks captured the gendarmerie on the island of Ouvéa, killed four gendarmes and took 27 hostages. Some 300 troops were flown in under the command of the head of the French elite anti-terrorist squad. The military stormed the cave where the Kanaks were holed up, killing 21 Kanaks and 2 policemen. The French troops reportedly tortured and beat civilians during the massacre.

The then minority Socialist Party government in Paris moved to bring the crisis under control. Prime Minister Rocard brokered the Matignon Accord, which was billed as a “compromise” between the independence movement, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste-FLNKS), and anti-independence leader Jacques Lafleur.

The accord, which set out the long-term process for independence, was ratified by an 81 percent majority in a plebiscite in which, however, only 37 percent of the electorate voted. The result failed to quell the aspirations of the pro-independence Kanak nationalists.

Fearing a possible flare-up of the troubles, the independence issue was buried by adopting the Noumea Accord which is the current framework defining the territory’s governance. When it was signed in 1998, it was a tripartite deal involving the French state, the anti-independence Rally for Caledonia in the Republic (RPCR) and the FLNKS.

New Caledonia’s economy is underpinned by annual subsidies from France of €1.3 billion (\$US1.48 billion), while French companies retain significant economic interests. The main island, Grande Terre, has the

world’s largest nickel deposits, about a quarter of all known reserves. It is also the second largest cobalt producer. Nickel is critically important in the defence industry, and has been designated a “strategic material” to ensure the French state can maintain a close watch over its production and distribution.

The global coronavirus pandemic has escalated uncertainty. With just 28 cases of COVID-19, the government has set up strict quarantine measures for international travellers. The global recession has heavily impacted tourism, transport and the export of nickel.

An economic crisis is unfolding. The Brazilian owner of the huge Vale nickel plant put its 95 percent stake up for sale in December after losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars as the world nickel price has plummeted.

Last month an Australian buyer, New Century Resources, withdrew its bid triggering fears of the site’s closure. The offer was opposed by pro-independence parties and Kanak chiefs because it included plans to export nickel ore rather than have it processed locally.

Vale has threatened to stop its operation by the end of October if no new buyer is found. The site’s possible closure and loss of 3,000 jobs threaten a meltdown of New Caledonia’s economy and social security systems. Two local bidders have come forward but there has been no word if Vale will accept any of the offers.

New Caledonia’s main trade union umbrella group, L’Union des syndicats des ouvriers et employés de Nouvelle-Calédonie (USOENC), last month called a toothless rally in Noumea to divert growing anger into a demand for the sale to be extended by six months. USOENC has not acted on a threat of a general strike.



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