

France deploys large security force ahead of New Caledonian independence referendum

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The government of French President Emmanuel Macron has launched an unprecedented security operation for New Caledonia's third and final independence referendum on December 12.

The first 250 police reinforcements arrived in the Pacific territory last month. France's overseas minister Sebastien Lecornu said a total of 2,000 security personnel will be sent, doubling that used during previous referendums in 2018 and 2020. Lecornu declared: "In a great democracy there can be no feeling of insecurity."

Police and armed forces will be joined by a special police tactical response unit supported by 160 vehicles, 30 armoured personnel carriers, two helicopters and a transport aircraft. A group of 60 "investigators" is being flown in for "as long as needed." A special cyber unit will supposedly respond to "hate speech" on social media. General Christophe Marietti, who is overseeing the operation, said the deployment will be "reassuring, dissuasive and reactive."

France's forces are being sent into a highly charged political situation to suppress simmering popular unrest. After the 2018 plebiscite, in which a majority voted against independence, protests outside the capital, Noumea, closed the main road for two days. Last November, widespread riots erupted over the sale of the Brazilian-owned Goro Nickel plant, which threatened the jobs of 3,000 workers. Riot squads were deployed and people injured in clashes with police.

After Paris refused to delay the referendum until next year, the pro-independence Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste, FLNKS) called for a boycott because of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 10,000 people have caught COVID-19 since the start of the latest outbreak in early September and more than 270 people, mainly indigenous Kanaks have died.

The FLNKS complained that its campaign is hampered

because COVID-19 measures restrict meetings. It also argues that the Kanak people are in mourning. The postponement call is supported by the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which includes the states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

According to the 1998 Noumea Accord, the final plebiscite must be held within two years of the previous vote. The anti-independence parties have consistently opposed a deferment, saying New Caledonia needs "clarity." Lecornu bluntly asserted that "in democracies" votes are held on time and only an out-of-control pandemic could make a date change possible.

Under the Matignon Accord (1988) and Noumea Accord, three referenda on independence were provided for. In 2020, just over 53 percent voted to remain as part of France, down from 56 percent in the first referendum, indicating growing support for independence. The turnout was 85 percent of the 180,000 enrolled, exceeding the 81 percent return in 2018.

Full independence has always been strenuously resisted by the French ruling elite. New Caledonia has been on the United Nations' so-called "decolonisation" list since 1986, when a near civil war saw French elite troops used to put down a Kanak insurrection.

Miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have engaged over recent years in militant struggles to defend jobs and conditions. This is bringing them into conflict with the entire ruling elite, including a relatively privileged layer of Kanaks, represented by the FLNKS, seeking a larger slice of the economic pie and a greater political say.

The workers' struggles have been sold out by the trade unions. Noumea remains a polarised capital, where many low-paid workers live in slum conditions. Kanaks, who make up 44 percent of the territory's 270,000 population, are socially disenfranchised, with many still living in primitive, subsistence circumstances in rural villages.

Under conditions of intensifying social and class conflicts, both pro-and anti-independence factions of the ruling elite are seeking to exploit the referendum to channel class anger into different forms of nationalism.

Political tensions have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislative Congress is composed of 26 pro-independence members, 25 anti-independents and three from the Pacific Awakening Party, representing settlers of Wallisian and Futunian descent. The fragile multi-party government faces an unprecedented budget crunch due to the impact of border closures on tourism.

As elsewhere internationally, COVID restrictions are being eased to boost the economy. Strict lockdowns have been retained only for weekends as the pandemic has eased slightly. There are 20 COVID-19 patients still in intensive care but much of public life has been reopened, and school children returned to class. Just 70 percent of those over the age of 12 have been vaccinated.

In February the previous coalition government, which included the FLNKS, collapsed amid deepening economic problems and social unrest over the sale of the nickel assets. For months there was no properly constituted government because none of the presidential candidates could secure a majority of votes among the 11-member cabinet.

The first pro-independence Kanak president, Louis Mapou was installed in July. This was promoted as boosting independence aspirations following the re-election of the pro-independence Roch Wamytan as president, or speaker, of Congress. However, the Kanak people are in a minority after generations of colonial settlement and migration.

Just over 180,000 people are eligible to vote, leaving tens of thousands of residents off the roll, a subject of prolonged controversy. The restricted electoral roll for the referenda is made up of Kanaks and non-Kanaks who have lived in New Caledonia continuously since 1994. Even taking this into consideration, a “yes” vote requires at least some from the settler and migrant communities to support independence.

Paris is formally “neutral,” but in reality opposes any move which diminishes its geo-strategic position as a Pacific power. New Caledonia is home to a major French military base and holds nearly a quarter of the world’s reserves of nickel, a strategic mineral.

A vote in favour of independence would initiate a transition period to transfer the remaining sovereign powers, relating to justice, defence, policing, monetary

policy and foreign affairs. France would cease to be financially responsible for key state functions. The financial sums involved are in the range of \$US2 billion a year. Automatic French and EU citizenship would end while mass emigration and capital flight are distinct possibilities.

A French government document outlining what the referendum result will mean vaguely promises that another “No” vote will not entrench the status quo but “usher in a new chapter in French/New Caledonian relations.” While the UN resolution on decolonisation is not affected, any future moves towards independence are effectively nullified. A “unilateral” declaration of independence would not be recognised.

In a visit to the region in 2018, Macron called for a new Indo-Pacific “axis” against China, signalling moves alongside other European imperialist powers to assert their interests under conditions of rising Chinese influence and Washington’s aggressive moves against China. France also views China as a competitor in its former colonies in Africa, where it maintains a political and military presence.

Pressures in the Pacific arena have sharply escalated following the signing in September of the AUKUS pact by the US, UK and Australia. AUKUS includes the repudiation of a €56 billion French submarine contract in favour of an agreement to equip Australia with US nuclear-powered submarines.

Declared without prior discussion with the NATO states, the far-reaching strategic realignment is explicitly directed against China. AUKUS has sidelined the European powers and will vastly increase US, UK and Australian military cooperation as they expand their build-up throughout the region, threatening to do so at France’s expense.



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