

Widespread boycott marks New Caledonia independence referendum

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The third and final referendum to decide the future of the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia was held on Sunday. Voters overwhelmingly rejected independence from France with the referendum boycotted by pro-independence Kanaks because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results saw 96.49 percent vote against and just 3.51 percent in favour, with a low 43.9 percent turnout. In predominantly Kanak areas nearly everyone refused to participate. The turnout in the Belep Islands was 0.6 percent, while on Lifou some voting stations had not a single voter. In Canala and Hiènghène on the main island of Grande Terre, less than 2 percent cast a vote.

The plebiscite will be deemed illegitimate by most indigenous Kanaks, who comprise 40 percent of the territory's 270,000 population. Before the vote, the pro-independence parties declared they would not recognise the result, and ruled out negotiations on any future status before the French presidential election next April. They also declined to meet the French overseas minister Sébastien Lecornu for post-referendum discussions.

The referendum was the culmination of a three decades-long process under the Matignon Accord (1988) and Noumea Accord (1998), which brought an end to a near civil-war during which French elite troops put down a Kanak insurrection. New Caledonia has been on the United Nations' so-called "decolonisation" list since 1986, but full independence has always been resisted by Paris.

Under the two accords, promoted as a "compromise" between the independence movement, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou of the FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste), and anti-independence leader Jacques Lafleur, three referenda on independence were provided for.

2020, just over 53 percent voted to remain in part of France, down from 56 percent in 2018, indicating growing support for independence. With a high turnout at 85 percent of the 180,000 voters enrolled, there were just 10,000 votes between the two camps in 2020.

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed Sunday's result, saying France is "more beautiful" because New Caledonia remains part of it. He said with the end of the Noumea Accord, the territory is free of the "binary choice" between yes and no. In reality, the formal "decolonisation" mechanism has ended with the colonised people effectively rejecting the legitimacy of the process.

The final referendum was not actually required until October 2022. In 2019, the French government and New Caledonia's political parties agreed that the referendum should not take place in close proximity to the French presidential elections. In June 2021, however, Paris broke the agreement and unilaterally fixed the December date.

With campaigning due to start, the Delta variant of COVID-19 hit the country in early September. The virus rapidly spread; more than 10,000 people caught the virus and 270 people, mainly Kanaks, died. With the majority of Kanaks in traditional mourning for 12 months, declared by the Kanak Customary Senate, the FLNKS and its allies called for the referendum to be deferred until next year.

The FLNKS argued that with COVID-19 health restrictions, it was impossible to create the democratic conditions for a fair election campaign. The Melanesian Spearhead Group, which includes the states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, also supported a postponement.

The pro-independence movement called for a boycott. Favouring a negative vote to maintain the French status

quo, however, Paris refused to budge. Lecornu bluntly asserted that “in democracies” votes are held on time and only an out-of-control pandemic could make a date change possible. The local anti-independence parties and the French establishment opposed a deferment, saying New Caledonia needed “clarity.”

The Macron government mounted an unprecedented military-police operation, despatching a 2,000-strong “security” force to the colony supported by vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, helicopters and a transport aircraft. General Christophe Marietti, overseeing the operation, declared the deployment would be “reassuring, dissuasive and reactive.”

Writing in the *Guardian* on December 2, New Zealand historian Adrian Muckle with Rowena Dickins Morrison and Benoît Trépied described the French government’s decision to proceed with the referendum as “a reckless political gambit with potentially dire consequences.” France was effectively undermining the promises of the “decolonisation” process of the last 30 years and risking “a return to violence.”

The authors noted that a key factor behind the push for the referendum to be run early was Macron’s “electoral calculus” in the lead up to the French presidential elections. Macron’s primary opponents are likely to be from France’s far right, which is overwhelmingly in favour of keeping hold of New Caledonia. The only French support for a postponement came from presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon who said going ahead would threaten the territory’s “equilibrium.”

Further entrenching France’s intransigence is the recently changed strategic position in the Indo-Pacific following the announcement of the AUKUS (Australia, UK and US) alliance and Australia’s withdrawal from its submarine deal with France. Paris will not countenance any diminution of its 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.

The referendum, however, will do nothing to resolve the impasse. Among those who are exposed by yet another betrayal is the relatively privileged layer of Kanaks, represented by the FLNKS, seeking a larger slice of the economic pie and a greater political say. The two accords effectively defused the independence movement. Money was poured into building a Kanak

infrastructure, training public servants and establishing a base for this layer in the lucrative mining industry. The FLNKS’ socialistic phrase-mongering was eschewed in return for political and business opportunities.

The increasingly moribund nationalist movement has entered into arrangements within the political elite to suppress growing anger among the working class. New Caledonia now has its first pro-independence Kanak president, Louis Mapou, who was installed in July, followed by the re-election of the pro-independence Roch Wamytan as president, or speaker, of Congress.

Meanwhile ordinary 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. Noumea remains a socially and economically polarised capital.

Class struggles have erupted. November 2020 saw riots and clashes with police over the sale of the Brazilian-owned Goro Nickel plant, which threatened the jobs of 3,000 workers. Broad sections of the working class, including miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have engaged in militant struggles over jobs and conditions, bringing them into conflict with both pro-and anti-independence factions of the ruling class.

Throughout the Pacific, formal independence has proven to be a sham. The island states that were granted nominal independence from the 1960s onwards remain totally dependent on the major powers economically and strategically.



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