

Protests erupt in New Caledonia as France amends colony's electoral system

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In New Caledonia's capital Nouméa on Saturday, April 13, two rival demonstrations took place, triggered by changes to the Pacific colony's electoral rolls that are being pushed through the French parliament. The protests followed weeks of unrest and rising tensions with demonstrations involving tens of thousands.

Organisers claimed that as many as 58,000 pro-independence and 35,000 pro-France marchers took part in the latest protests, under heavy security surveillance with police reinforcements from France. If accurate, the figures account for 34 percent of New Caledonia's population of 270,000 and are the largest such gatherings since the civil war conditions that erupted in the 1980s.

One of the marches was organised by a pro-independence coordination committee (CCAT) close to Union Calédonienne (UC), part of the pro-independence FLNKS umbrella that claims to represent indigenous Kanaks. The other was called by two right-wing pro-France parties, the Rassemblement and Les Loyalistes.

The constitutional amendment proposes to change eligibility rules to allow citizens who have lived in the territory for at least 10 uninterrupted years to vote in local elections for the provincial assemblies and local Congress, or parliament.

The change will open the door to up to an estimated 40,000 more voters, shifting the overall balance away from indigenous Kanaks as more French nationals become eligible to vote. Under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, New Caledonia's local elections restricted voting rights to citizens born or who had resided there before 1998.

The Accord was brokered by the then Socialist Party government in Paris as a "compromise" between the independence and anti-independence factions. While setting out a long-term process for a series of independence referenda, the agreements also gave limited influence to a privileged Kanak layer. Money was poured into building a Kanak infrastructure, training public

servants and establishing a base for this social layer in the lucrative mining industry.

Now, under conditions of intensifying social and class conflicts, both factions of the ruling elite are seeking to exploit the latest constitutional moves to channel class anger into different forms of nationalism.

Opponents say the measure could make indigenous Kanaks a minority on their "own" land and denounce the process as forced upon them by Paris. Congress Chairman Roch Wamytan told the pro-independence rally that the French State "is no longer impartial. It has touched a taboo and we must resist. Unfreezing this electoral roll is leading us to death."

The pro-France parties marching in support of the amendment meanwhile brandished French tricolour flags, sang "La Marseillaise" and claimed "one man, one vote" on their banners. Other signs read "This is our home!", "Unfreeze democracy" and "proud to be Caledonians, proud to be French."

The Accord is entrenched within the French constitution, so a constitutional change is required. This process began with a vote in the French Senate on April 2 and has gone to the National Assembly for debate before a vote in Congress, a gathering of both Houses, with a required majority of three fifths to pass. New Caledonia's provincial elections have been postponed from May to mid-December.

The French government is determined to impose the measure as part of its efforts to tighten Paris' grip on the colony following French President Emmanuel Macron's visit last July. France's Home Affairs and Overseas Minister Gérald Darmanin, who initiated the constitutional process, has visited Nouméa half a dozen times over the past 12 months to garner support for it.

Macron's 2023 trip was designed to assert France's imperialist interests as a Pacific power. It coincided with a surge of diplomatic manoeuvres across the region

ramping up Washington’s warmongering against China.

France’s strategically placed territory is vital to this agenda. The island hosts a major French military base—which is to receive a boost to troop deployments and a new training academy—and holds nearly a quarter of the world’s reserves of nickel, essential in the manufacture of stainless steel and in the defence industry.

In Nouméa, Macron bluntly told those in favour of “separatism” they should accept the pro-France victory in the final referendum on independence held in December 2021. “After these three referendums, I do not underestimate the disappointed hopes of those who backed a completely different project,” Macron said. “But I say to them all, together we all have to have the grace to accept these results and to build the future together.”

The current tensions, however, reveal that none of the issues around independence have been resolved. Three referenda were held over five years. In the first two, 57 and 53 percent rejected independence. The final referendum was widely viewed as illegitimate. With a 40 percent voter turnout, it resulted in a 97 percent vote against secession after Kanaks boycotted the process amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Full independence has always been strenuously resisted by the French ruling class. New Caledonia has been on the United Nations’ so-called “decolonisation” list since 1986, when French elite troops brutally put down a Kanak insurrection. France’s voting record at the UN shows that Paris repeatedly abstains on resolutions on decolonisation and self-determination.

The constitutional crisis comes at a time of escalating economic and social tensions. As global nickel prices tumble, New Caledonia’s crucial nickel mining and smelting industry is in turmoil, faced with increasing competition from emerging world producers such as Indonesia and China which are producing much cheaper nickel.

Last month, one of the three major processing plants, Koniambo (KNS), was idled due to a decision by its major financier, the Anglo-Swiss giant Glencore, which is seeking a potential buyer for its 49 percent shareholding. The two other plants, Prony Resources and Société le Nickel (SLN), are facing similar crises.

The French government and its Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, who visited New Caledonia in November 2023, are demanding that a “nickel pact” be signed by all local “players.” The plan which involves French financial assistance amounting to 200 million euros would be tied to far-reaching “reforms” to make New Caledonia’s

nickel “competitive” under world market conditions.

The industry until recently employed about a quarter of the total workforce. Hundreds of jobs have already been axed with thousands more at risk. Clashes have erupted between security forces and protesters opposed to the pact. On April 9, clashes involving firearms, teargas and stone-throwing went on for most of the day, blocking access roads to Nouméa and the towns of Saint-Louis and Mont-Dore.

Miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have repeatedly engaged in militant struggles to defend jobs and conditions. This has brought them into conflict with the entire ruling elite, including the privileged layer represented by the FLNKS, which seeks a larger slice of the economic pie and a greater political say.

Workers’ struggles have been sold out by the trade unions. Nouméa is a polarised capital, where many low-paid workers live in slum conditions. Kanaks, who make up 44 percent of the population are socially disenfranchised, with many living in primitive, subsistence circumstances in rural villages.

As ordinary people reel from escalating living costs, both the local government led by President Louis Mapou—a pro-independence Kanak politician from the National Union for Independence, part of FLNKS—and the rival anti-independence forces all stand on the side of the business elite, opposing any meaningful measures to end poverty and inequality.

The FLNKS is asking that the constitutional amendment be withdrawn and that a French “dialogue mission”—similar to the delegations sent by Paris before the signing of the Nouméa Accord headed by a “high, recognised and independent official”—should come and negotiate a compromise. According to the FLNKS, “dialogue, a consensual solution and a comprehensive agreement” are still feasible. Paris, however, is unlikely to accommodate.



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