

France maintains military grip on New Caledonia amid ongoing unrest

John Braddock
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After his 18-hour visit to New Caledonia on May 23 to head off anti-colonial riots, French President Emmanuel Macron last week announced the state of emergency he had imposed would not be extended “for the time being.” The 12-day state of emergency officially ended at 5am on May 28.

Since rioting erupted on May 13, mainly involving disaffected indigenous Kanak youth, seven people have been killed and the capital Nouméa and surrounding districts devastated. Over 300 people have been injured and nearly 500 arrested. Damage of €1 billion is estimated with up to 500 business and retail stores looted or destroyed by arson. Serious shortages of food and fuel are contributing to ongoing tension.

Before leaving Nouméa, Macron declared France would not “force through” the contentious laws to expand the country’s voter rolls and allow more recent immigrants to vote that had provoked the riots. But he has not withdrawn the legislation.

Macron initially set the lifting of protesters’ blockades as the precondition for the resumption of “concrete and serious” talks on New Caledonia’s long-term future. A “mission” consisting of three high-level public servants was left behind to promote a resumption of political dialogue between leaders of all parties.

Macron decreed that the dusk-to-dawn curfew remains in force and announced an additional seven mobile gendarme units with 480 personnel would be flown to the colony, bringing the total number of security forces to 3,500. He again condemned the protesters saying “this violence cannot pretend to represent a legitimate political action.”

Paris is also sending 16 heavy armoured vehicles. Minister of Overseas Territories Gérald Darmanin said they “will help the police put an end to all roadblocks and completely re-establish public order in the archipelago.” The vehicles, which are machine-gun and tear-gas

capable, were deployed during France’s urban riots in June 2023.

Macron said the decision not to renew the state of emergency was to “allow the components of FLNKS [pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste] to hold meetings and to be able to go to the roadblocks and ask for them to be lifted”—that is, to make the FLNKS directly responsible for bringing the rebellion to heel.

Restrictions have been lifted on movements and house arrests ended on pro-independence leaders, including Christian Tein of the CCAT (Field Action Coordination Committee) which is regarded as the main organiser of the protests. In a speech published on social networks the day after being invited to meet with Macron, Tein had called for the easing of security measures to allow him to speak to militants.

The FLNKS, however, has now admitted it cannot persuade protesters to remove roadblocks because activists are not convinced Macron will drop the electoral reform. In a letter to Macron’s negotiating team, the FLNKS said: “Despite several meetings with activists mobilised at roadblocks and two statements from FLNKS calling for appeasement ... this message is still hardly heard on the ground.”

The letter, quoted in media reports on June 4, said Macron’s refusal to guarantee that the constitutional reform will be abandoned “represents a real difficulty and prevents our activists from hearing the call for calm and appeasement.”

The FLNKS is an alliance of four pro-independence parties and sub-groups, including the CCAT. It does not represent the interests of indigenous workers and youth but a privileged layer who have benefited from the so-called “power sharing” arrangements under the Matignon Accord (1988) and Nouméa Accord (1998) initiated by France to head off the independence movement and quell

the civil war conditions of the 1980s.

Last month's rioting erupted from below, largely outside the control of the official "independence" parties. The unrest expresses deepening social class discontent, particularly among unemployed and alienated Kanak youth who see no future amid grinding inequality and an escalating economic crisis. Many of the targets of looting and damage are businesses associated with wealthier layers.

In Nouméa and its outskirts, security operations are continuing, with several neighbourhoods and main access roads still blocked and controlled by protesting youth. Commercial flights in and out of the international Nouméa-La Tontouta airport only resumed on June 5, according to Agence France-Presse, after weeks of being cut off by roadblocks.

Video posted by the French High Commission shows intense security operations in the Rivière-Salée district close to the Nouméa city centre, including a company of CRS riot police, elite GIGN national police, four units of gendarme mobiles and RAID counter-terror officers.

Exchanges of gunfire between police and protesters occurred on June 4 in the suburb of Saint-Laurent. Two Kanak men were shot and are in critical condition in hospital. Meanwhile, three local police are facing a criminal inquiry after a video went viral of one of them kicking a Kanak man in the head while he was handcuffed.

Church leader Billy Wetewea told RNZ Pacific the police violence "is not helping to bring calmness to the people on the ground" and it was "not the first" such incident that has been recorded.

Macron has no intention of allowing any moves towards full independence. While in Nouméa he explicitly endorsed the third self-determination referendum, held in December 2021 but boycotted by the Kanaks, which resulted in a 96 percent vote to remain with France. He bluntly declared: "I will not go back on this."

Back in Paris, Macron provocatively threatened that if an agreement on an alternative way forward is not reached by next month, he could institute a full constitutional referendum on the matter with all French citizens able to vote.

In a bid to blame foreign manipulation for the unrest, Darmanin accused Azerbaijan of stoking tensions following France's support for Armenia in conflicts in 2020 and 2023. Azerbaijan invited separatists from Martinique, French Guiana, New Caledonia and French Polynesia to a Baku conference last July in support of

"liberation and anti-colonialist movements."

France's brutal clampdown in New Caledonia is fuelling outrage across the Pacific, and no doubt concern among local governments that it could provoke similar unrest among their own impoverished populations.

Vanuatu's Climate Minister Ralph Regenvanu told the media at a UN Small Islands Developing States conference last month: "France has caused this crisis by its failure to recognise the Kanaks' call for the third referendum to be deferred," adding "everyone could see this coming three years ago." He warned that if France does not withdraw its legislative amendments, "the violence will continue."

The Pacific Islands Forum, of which New Caledonia is a member, is seeking to intervene. Cook Islands Prime Minister and Forum chair Mark Brown has offered to "provide a supported and neutral space for all parties to come together in the spirit of the Pacific Way, to find an agreed way forward that safeguards the interests of the people of New Caledonia."

Kanaks and their supporters have organised protests in France, as well as outside the French embassy in New Zealand, calling for an end to colonial rule. A 'Rally for Kanaky' is to be held next week at the French embassy in Port Vila, Vanuatu, itself a former colony of both France and Great Britain.

The French ruling class, however, is determined to cement itself as an Indo-Pacific power. As Macron takes the lead pushing for NATO troops on the ground in Ukraine to confront Russia, a wider war beyond Europe and including the Asia-Pacific is underway. France's grip on the mineral reserves and strategic military bases in New Caledonia are vital to it in the looming US-led imperialist operations against China.



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