

Police killings in New Caledonia as Macron installs far-right administration

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French police shot and killed two men in New Caledonia on September 19, further stoking tensions with pro-independence groups days ahead of the September 24 public holiday which marks France's annexation of the Pacific archipelago in 1853.

The shootings bring the number of deaths to 13 since unrest erupted in May over the French government's changes to voting laws that extended the franchise to recent migrants. Indigenous Kanaks feared the move will further marginalise them politically as they face worsening economic and social conditions.

The men were killed in a confrontation between French gendarmerie and Kanak protesters in the village of Saint Louis, a centre of the independence movement near the capital Nouméa. The pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) condemned the "barbaric and humiliating methods" used by police that resulted in "summary execution" and called for an independent investigation.

The four-party FLNKS, which is part of the colony's political establishment, moved to defuse anger among the Kanak population. It issued a statement calling on "the entire population not to give in to violence, despite their pain and facing provocations. Today, more than ever, peace and justice must guide our actions, with a view to preserving the stability of our country."

Public prosecutor Yves Dupas said the police operation using armoured vehicles was to arrest suspects for the attempted murder of officers and armed robbery, with "nearly 300 shots noted in recent months." The deceased were the subject of a search warrant "among a total of 13 persons implicated, sought and located in the Saint Louis tribe," he said.

Dupas claimed police came under fire from up to five people and had responded. Their first shot "hit a man, aged 30, positioned as a lone gunman, in the right side of the abdomen," he said. "The second shot hit a man, aged

29, in the chest." One died at the scene, while the other died at a local hospital.

France is carrying out brutal military operations to maintain their colonial occupation against fierce resistance. French military units have previously deployed to Afghanistan, Kosovo, Côte d'Ivoire and the Indian Ocean dependency of Mayotte. Saint Louis itself has a long colonial history. After Kanak revolts in 1878, people fled to the area to escape military attacks, where their descendants still live.

The crackdown had claimed its 10th victim on July 10 in an exchange of gunfire with militants holed up in a church in Saint Louis. The authorities blamed the victim, the nephew of prominent pro-independence politician and local Congress chairman Roch Wamytan, saying he had shot at the gendarmes, who then returned fire.

The uprising is not subsiding. RNZ Pacific reported on September 10 that the Saint Denis Church of Balade, in Pouébo, on the northern tip of the main island of Grande Terre, had been destroyed by fire. The arson attack, the sixth in recent months, was symbolic: it was the first Catholic church, established ten years before France took formal possession of the colony.

With the Saint Louis stronghold still firmly in the hands of armed militants, security forces constructed a concrete wall along the provincial road beside the village, cutting off the tribe. French police then began their operations the week before the fatal confrontation. *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan reported on X/Twitter that the gendarmes used tear gas during clashes.

Speaking with *La Voix du Caillou*, French High Commissioner Louis Le France claimed the "security situation" had been "much calmer for a month." He was forced to admit: "In Nouméa, we have recurring problems... with the young who live in social housing and squats." Authorities have maintained a nightly curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., restricted alcohol sales, banned the

transport of fuel and possession of firearms.

Security was beefed up ahead of the public holiday with nearly 7,000 French troops and gendarmes now entrenched in the colony. Le Franc told local media: “This has never been seen before, even during the toughest times of the events in 1984 and 1988—we have never had this.” He was referring to a Kanak revolt in the 1980s that only ended with the 1998 “power-sharing” Nouméa Accord promising a series of independence referenda.

The stalemate is likely to be exacerbated by French President Emmanuel Macron’s move to install a far-right government in Paris following the July snap election. Prime Minister Michel Barnier has previously sided with pro-France “Loyalists” in the territory, who promptly applauded his appointment. During the election, fascistic Rassemblement National (RN) leader Marine Le Pen, who demands that Barnier accommodate the RN platform, bluntly declared that New Caledonia was “French” and would not see independence for “30 or 40 years.”

Macron has promised talks with New Caledonia’s politicians to restore “dialogue” to resolve the crisis and the territory’s long-term future. Since the French National Assembly’s dissolution in June and the subsequent general election, the Constitutional bill on New Caledonia’s electoral roll has been in limbo, with Macron declaring it was “suspended,” but not “withdrawn.”

Indicating an ongoing repressive stance in the colony, the newly-appointed overseas minister is François Noël Buffet, a senator from the right-wing Les Républicains, which received just 7.25 percent of the popular vote. Unlike his direct predecessors who were “delegate” ministers under the minister of home affairs, Buffet is a full minister directly under the prime minister’s office.

A bipartisan delegation from New Caledonia is currently in Paris meeting with officials. It includes New Caledonian MPs in the French Senate and the National Assembly, two each from the pro-independence and Loyalist factions, as well as caucus leaders in the territory’s Congress, the Chair of the customary Senate, a representative of the local government, and the Chair of the Economic and Social Council.

On the agenda is the Congress’ reconstruction plan totaling €4.1 billion over five years, which leaders say is needed to rebuild New Caledonia. The estimate of material damage is €2.2 billion, over 800 businesses destroyed and 20,000 people who lost their jobs. Even if such payments eventuate, they will do nothing to address the grinding poverty, unemployment and social alienation

that is the root cause of the rebellion.

The crisis has now produced sharp shifts in the colony’s political situation. In a surprise vote in late August, pro-independence Congress President Wamytan was replaced by Veylma Falaeo from the Eveil Océanien (EO, Oceania Awakening) party. EO with only three members in Congress previously provided a majority for the pro-independence faction. But Falaeo won the support of the Loyalists to shift the paper-thin majority in their favour.

EO’s base is in the community from the neighbouring French territory of Wallis and Futuna, and ostensibly promotes a “middle way” between the contesting blocs. Following Falaeo’s victory the Loyalist parties declared their “joy” at the ending of Wamytan’s five-year presidency.

The FLNKS is meanwhile embroiled in internal crisis. A congress called on the weekend of 31 August saw two of the four constituent parties—the “moderate” Kanak Liberation Party (PALIKA) and Melanesian Progressive Union (UPM)—refuse to attend. Splitting the organization in two, they said the priority for them was for violence to cease and all roadblocks to be lifted for “normalcy” to be restored.

The leaders of PALIKA and UPM had previously voiced their opposition to the stance of the so-called “hard-line” faction of the Union Calédonienne (UC) and Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien (RDO). Beginning last year UC mobilised a series of protests coordinated by its CCAT (Field Action Coordinating Cell), which escalated into the months-long riots.

The UC announced its intention before the congress to nominate CCAT leader Christian Téin for the post of FLNKS president and to formally integrate CCAT as the recognised “mobilisation tool” for FLNKS. Téin, who the authorities accuse of being the “ringleader” of the uprising, has been arrested and deported to pre-trial detention in a French jail.

Despite the FLNKS’ radical posturing, spokeswoman Laurie Humuni told media following the truncated congress that it was willing to resume talks on New Caledonia’s political future, but only with the French State and not with opposing anti-independence parties.



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