

New Caledonia government installs anti-independence president

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Following the collapse of New Caledonia's government on Christmas Eve, the French Pacific colony's cabinet has installed an anti-independence loyalist as its new president. Alcide Ponga, 49, is the first indigenous Kanak to lead the pro-France Le Rassemblement party.

Ponga was appointed by the Congress's newly elected executive on January 8, replacing outgoing President Louis Mapou of the pro-independence Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika). Mapou had bitterly declared, "It's a dirty political blow to the country."

Le Rassemblement, which is affiliated with the fascistic Les Républicains (LR) in France, is allied with the colony's "Loyalist" bloc that includes Les Républicains Calédoniennes (LRC), Générations NC, and Mouvement populaire calédonien (MPC). Supported by wealthier French expatriates, including descendants of settlers known as Caldoches, and the business elite, they are overwhelmingly right-wing and fiercely anti-independence.

From a prominent Kanak family, Ponga studied political science in France and made his career in the nickel industry before entering politics in 2014. His uncle, Maurice Ponga, served as a minister in the first two governments established after the 1998 Nouméa Accord in which anti-independence politicians held a majority within the executive. He was a member of the European Parliament for 2009-19.

Last July Alcide Ponga was defeated in polling for the snap elections for France's National Assembly, which saw a surge in support for the territory's pro-independence candidates. Standing in the heavily Kanak Northern constituency, his home, Ponga decisively lost to Emmanuel Tjibaou of the pro-independence Union Calédonienne (UC), by 57.01 to 42.99 percent of the votes.

The sharp shift within New Caledonia's political establishment, after seven months of violent unrest by

impoverished and alienated Kanak youth, is an expression of what the WSWs has characterised as "the violent lurch of bourgeois politics to the right around the world." It coincides with the resignation of Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau following the collapse of governments in Germany, France and Austria.

The colony's Mapou government was toppled after environment and sustainable development minister Jérémie Katidjo-Monnier, the sole representative from the pro-France Calédonie Ensemble, resigned and his party refused to nominate a replacement.

New Caledonia's 11-member cabinet is made up from the parties represented at the Congress. It ostensibly operates under a proportional principle of "collegiality," implying that the multi-party executive, which includes both supporters and opponents of independence, works together.

The arrangement is a product of the "power sharing" Nouméa Accord, initiated by the French Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin in 1998, which ended nearly a decade of civil unrest. The nationalist leadership abandoned its struggle for independence in return for a place in office and access to business opportunities, including a stake in the vital nickel industry, while enabling France to maintain overall colonial control.

The 54-member Congress reconvened after Christmas to vote on the new cabinet. The Loyalists-Rassemblement bloc, including Ponga, won four seats. A joint list of the anti-independence Calédonie ensemble (CE) and Eveil Océanien (EO, Oceania Awakening) took two; the pro-independence UC-Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) three, and the Union nationale pour l'Indépendance (UNI) two.

Ponga's elevation to the presidency came after the first attempt failed to reach a majority. The next day, during a contentious meeting convened by French High Commissioner Louis Le Franc, Ponga defeated the UC

candidate Samuel Hnepeune by 6-3 votes.

According to *Islands Business* correspondent Nic Maclellan, Hnepeune, a leading Kanak businessman and former head of the domestic airline Air Calédonie, won the three votes of his UC-FLNKS faction. However, the two members of the UNI abstained, reflecting ongoing tensions between UC and Palika, the two largest members of the now broken FLNKS coalition.

The months of unrest have produced a crisis of rule within the colony's bourgeois elite, including the pro-independence movement itself. While a level of "surface calm" is now being reported, the riots have left 14 dead, hundreds arrested, businesses shuttered and the economy on its knees. Some 6,000 French security forces remain deployed, enforcing what French President Emmanuel Macron has previously referred to as "Republican order."

There are simmering tensions within the pro-France bloc. CE's Philippe Dunoyer resigned when he was not offered the portfolio of finance and economy. Dunoyer and CE had proposed a program including market reforms, a new relationship with Paris and major cuts to government spending and the public service, but they could not reach agreement with the Loyalists and Rassemblement.

Amid the ongoing popular unrest, the official pro-independence bloc has suffered a series of reversals. In a surprise vote in August, Congress President Roch Wamytan of the FLNKS was replaced by Veylma Falaeo from EO. The EO's three members had 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, enabling her to take over the Congress presidency.

The EO's electoral base is in the community from the neighbouring French territory of Wallis and Futuna and it had sought to promote a "middle way" between the contesting blocs. The Loyalist parties declared their "joy" at the ending of Wamytan's five-year presidency and denounced what they described as his "guilty silence in the face of the ongoing violence since 13 May."

New Caledonia faces an immediate economic crisis with an estimated €2.2 billion in damage. An emergency €231 million French government payment has been reduced by one third. The aid package to allow essential public services to keep operating was endorsed in an eleventh-hour vote at the National Assembly, just before the French government of Prime Minister Michel Barnier fell to a motion of no confidence. New Caledonia's Congress failed to endorse the third and last tranche of a

financial "reform package" which was a precondition of the aid.

Nothing has been done to resolve the fundamental issues behind the unrest, triggered by poverty, inequality, unemployment and social desperation. The rebellion brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory's political establishment. The official independence movement was exposed by the movement that erupted from below and outside its control, as well as by its subsequent efforts under orders from Macron to rein it in.

In November, the four-party FLNKS split apart after multi-party talks, which the FLNKS parties embraced, began with France's far-right Barnier government regarding the future of the territory. Following separate party congresses, two of the "moderate" FLNKS components, the Melanesian Progressive Union (UPM) and PALIKA, declared they did not recognise the way the "hard line" UC had been operating during the riots.

Responding, UC secretary-general Dominique Fochi said the FLNKS was the "national liberation movement" recognised as the official representative of the Kanak people. "This is the message we want to convey to New Caledonians, and... the French State," he declared. He insisted the FLNKS remained the only "interlocutor bearing the voice of the... anti-colonial movement regarding [New Caledonia's] political future."

Negotiations between all the parties, pro-and anti-independence, and the French state were initially expected to begin before Christmas but the Barnier government's defeat in December brought this to a halt. The installation of a new minority French government under Prime Minister François Bayrou has strengthened the hand of the far-right.

During the French elections, the "left" New Popular Front (NFP) coalition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, now supporting the new government from the outside, issued meaningless calls for "dialogue" and "consensus" over the colony's crisis. However, the effective opposition leader, the National Rally's fascistic Marine Le Pen, has previously warned that New Caledonia is "French" and will not see independence for "30 or 40 years."



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