

New Caledonia remains part of France under “historic” agreement

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New Caledonia’s pro-and-anti-independence parties have committed to a so-called “historic” deal regarding the future political status of the French Pacific territory, which is now set to become a “state” within the French Constitution.

The 13-page agreement, officially entitled “Agreement Project of the Future of New Caledonia,” was signed on July 12 after 10 days of negotiations in Bougival on the outskirts of Paris. The talks, convened by French President Emmanuel Macron, were aimed at creating a new document to replace the 1998 “power sharing” Nouméa Accord.

The delegations included all New Caledonia’s political factions; four anti-independence groups (the Loyalists; Rassemblement-Les Républicains; Eveil océanien and Calédonie ensemble), and two pro-independence groups: UC-FLNKS (Union Calédonienne with the main Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front coalition), and Union Nationale pour l’Indépendance (UNI), which includes the Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika) and Union Progréssiste en Mélanésie (UPM).

The deal creates a “State of New Caledonia” within France, and a New Caledonian nationality. Macron declared it a “bet on trust” leading to a “peaceful relationship with France.” It commits all the signatories, who must now sell it to their own deeply suspicious political bases.

A joint sitting of the French National Assembly and French Senate will be held this year to codify the Bougival Accord into the Constitution. It will then be taken to a referendum in New Caledonia in early 2026, followed by ratification in the French National Assembly.

The Bougival gathering was dubbed the “summit of last chance” after a series of talks between February and May this year, chaired by French Overseas Territories Minister Manuel Valls, failed to reach agreement. The last meeting in Nouméa collapsed after Valls tabled a proposal that contained a form of “sovereignty with France,” including transfer of key powers—defence, law and order, currency, foreign affairs, justice—from Paris to New Caledonia and dual Kanaky-France citizenship.

The negotiations originally were called in the wake of last

year’s seven-month uprising by indigenous Kanak youth against French colonial rule. There was widespread rioting and 14 people killed, mostly by French gendarmes, with damage estimated at €2.2 billion. Fuelled by social inequality, unemployment and economic desperation, the rebellion brought alienated youth into conflict, not only with colonial oppression, but with the territory’s political establishment, including the official Kanak pro-independence parties.

The pro-independence movement split in December, with the majority FLNKS demanding full sovereignty and the “moderate” factions seeking a shared arrangement with Paris. The pro-France “Loyalist” parties flatly opposed any settlement which failed to take into account the three referendums between 2018 and 2021, including in the controversial final vote boycotted by pro-independence Kanaks, that had rejected independence.

France’s ruling elite was never going to relinquish its grip on its strategically important colonial possession. From the beginning Macron made it clear that “Republican order” would be imposed in the most brutal fashion. Over 7,000 military and police personnel were dispatched to put down the “insurrection” and leading Kanak independence activists sent to prisons in France. Macron pressured the pro-independence parties to bring the young rioters to heel—a task they obediently carried out.

Under the deal, calls at the heart of the uprising for full and sovereign political independence have been betrayed. The agreement does not grant France’s 172 years-old colony independence, either immediately or in the future.

The agreement is broader than proposals previously tabled by Valls. The new “state of Caledonia” will be established through a “basic law” enshrined in France’s constitution. It can be recognised by other nations and establish a “Caledonian nationality,” while letting residents also have French nationality. It could also eventually allow New Caledonians to change the territory’s name and flag.

The French State retains control of policing, courts, currency and defence, but with new structures to enlist a

wider layer of the New Caledonian political establishment in an extended “partnership.” The Southern Province, which includes Nouméa and is a centre of anti-independence forces, will receive new fiscal and administrative powers, plus extra seats in an expanded 56-member Congress.

Authority over foreign affairs will be transferred to the New Caledonia government. The colony already has enhanced its “regional integration” since gaining full membership of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2016. However, it must conduct diplomatic relations “in accordance with the international commitments and the interests of France,” and uphold Paris’s major strategic interests, which includes France’s military base on the main island and its commitment to the US-led buildup to war against China.

While France retains control of the courts and police, the deal provides for the creation of provincial and “community” policing. This local police “face” is to offset the deployment of the unpopular French gendarmes which were responsible for brutal and deadly attacks on Kanak protestors and rioters.

All residents will also be allowed to vote after living 10 years in the territory. Currently, only people born in the colony or residing there before 1998 can vote. The proposed change, which strengthens the influence of recently arrived migrants from France and diminishes the Kanak proportion of the voting population, was one of the primary issues that ignited the territory’s civil unrest. Previously deferred provincial elections, due to be held later this year under the old restrictive rules, will be postponed until mid-2026.

The deal also calls for an economic and financial “recovery pact” that would include support for the territory’s vital nickel processing capabilities which are currently under extreme pressure from suppliers in Indonesia and China. There are likely to be limits on the destination of the nickel, which has strategic and military uses and which France wants to remain within the European Union as a designated “strategic mineral.”

Both sides have swiftly moved to promote the deal which has already met with a backlash. In a joint release, the two main pro-France parties, Les Loyalistes and Rassemblement-LR, said the agreement was “historic” and “perennial,” offering New Caledonia “a future of peace, stability and prosperity” while at the same time considering France’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Anti-independence politician Nicolas Metzdorf, however, called it a compromise born of “demanding dialogue” and described the Caledonian nationality as a “real concession.” Philippe Blaise, vice-president of Southern Province administration, said the agreement “crossed a red line” by recognising a “Caledonian state” and a “distinct nationality,” which he said was incompatible with French

unity.

For the pro-independence parties Emmanuel Tjibaou, New Caledonia’s member of the French National Assembly, said the accord would help “us get out of the spiral of violence.” He described a “difficult path” ahead but one that would allow Kanaks and other Caledonians to “move forward together” while “mending divisions.”

In an official statement the FLNKS claimed that the agreement included “major advances towards the objective of bringing together, over time, all the elements of sovereignty. At a difficult time for our country, marked by a deep political, economic and social crisis, we, the group mandated by FLNKS have assumed responsibility.”

Many pro-independence activists have taken to social media to condemn the deal. Local journalist Brigitte Whaap told Radio NZ that while some of the public were “relieved” there had been progress and an agreement was proposed, many are “feeling betrayed, really upset about this situation.”

Brenda Wanabo-Ipeze, a leader of the Coordination Cell for Field Actions (CCAT), currently incarcerated in France, said: “This text was signed without us. It does not bind us.” CCAT has been declared by the authorities as the main organising group behind the protests with a dozen of its leaders still facing serious criminal charges.

Joel Kasarerhou, president of civil society group Construire Autrement (Build Differently), called the agreement “stillborn” and “lacking ambition and vision.” Kasarerhou said the youth at the heart of the May 2024 uprising had been “forgotten or barely mentioned,” and he feared another “May 13”—the date the riots began.

What the deal has not addressed, let alone resolved, is the deep economic and social crisis hitting the colony, and in particular the impoverished working class and youth. Whatever the official outcome of the high-level political maneuvering now under way, the issues behind the unrest—ingrained poverty, social inequality, unemployment and social desperation—remain.



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