

POLICY BRIEF

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Power plays and foreign interference: the case of the French territory of New Caledonia

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Since May 13, 2024, New Caledonia has been shaken by violent clashes accompanied by looting. For a long time confined to the capital Noumea, the clashes spread throughout the main island and had caused eight deaths by June 8, 2024. More than 800 shops and businesses as well as hospitals and health services were affected. The airport was closed and a state of emergency was declared by the president of the government of the Republic on May 16.¹ The demonstrations took place at the call of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (French: Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste; FLNKS) and in particular the Field Action Coordination Cell (French: Cellule de Coordination des Actions de Terrain; CCAT), eleven of whose activists were arrested on June 28 and transferred to mainland France to face trial, causing an upsurge in violence. This is not the first time that New Caledonia has been threatened by riots. New Caledonia became a French colony in 1853, a penal colony in 1860, and then an overseas territory in 1945. After a first referendum in 1987 saw more than 98% of residents vote in favor of remaining in France, very serious riots with hostage-taking left 23 dead, including four gendarmes, in 1988. After these riots, the Matignon Accords were signed, providing for gradual evolution towards autonomy.

According to the separatists, the riots were provoked by the Senate's approval of an electoral reform law that would restore the right to vote in local elections to 20% of the electorate who have lived in New Caledonia for less than 10 years. To satisfy the demands of the Kanak separatists, the Noumea Accords (1998) provided for the right to vote to be granted only to the original inhabitants (the Kanaks) and to those mainly but not exclusively from mainland France who had

1 Caroline Antic-Martin, « Emeutes en Nouvelle Calédonie, chronologie de 15 jours de violence », <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/nouvellecaldonie/emeutes-en-nouvelle-caledonie-chronologie-de-15-jours-de-violences-1491446.html>, 27-05-2024.

lived in New Caledonia for more than 10 years. The draft constitutional law that led to this change was approved by the National Assembly on May 16. However, President Emmanuel Macron suspended the proceedings on June 12 without easing tensions.

To the surprise of many observers, many Azerbaijani flags were waved during the riots in addition to the Kanak independence flag.

On May 16, after three days of rioting, French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin declared: “Interference is not a fantasy; it is a reality.”²

A special status

Among all the French overseas territories, New Caledonia has a special status known as “sui generis.” This special status is enshrined in the constitution and grants New Caledonia very broad autonomy. In 1998, the Noumea Accords were approved by all loyalist and pro-independence parties. These agreements led to the constitutional revision of July 20, 1998. The resulting law of March 19, 1999 recognized the specificity of this overseas territory.

New Caledonia is divided into three semi-autonomous provinces, as provided for in the previous Matignon agreements of 1988. Each of these provinces has its own provincial assembly and has representatives in the Territorial Congress, which in turn elects an 11-member executive. The members of these two bodies are elected in the same election by restricted suffrage - only residents of New Caledonia

for more than 10 years can vote - within a provincial framework. Finally, New Caledonia has a president of the government elected by the executive. In 2024, the President is an independentist.

Apart from its legal specificities, New Caledonia also has specific rights. Since January 1, 2000, transfers of power have concerned four areas: labor law, foreign trade, regulation of hydrocarbons, chrome and nickel and public primary education. The State (France) remains competent in sovereign areas such as defense, maintenance of order, justice, currency and immigration.³ France also finances 18% of New Caledonia’s GNP. The rest of the territory’s financial resources mainly come from nickel. The French state no longer has any jurisdiction over the extraction, processing or export of nickel, which now fall under the purview of the local authorities, but it is the French State which assumes the losses of the nickel industry. Since 2016, this contribution has reached 700 million euros.⁴

The next elections for the Congress of New Caledonia must take place in December 2024, with an enlarged electoral body which could put the separatists in the minority with the integration of voters who have not lived in New Caledonia for more than 10 years and who could represent 20% of the new electorate. This was one of the causes of the riots in spring 2024: the Kanaks, who in fact only represent 41.2% of the population of the overseas territory, fear no longer winning local elections.

2 « Gerald Darmanin accuse l’Azerbaïdjan d’ingérence en Nouvelle Calédonie », *Le Figaro*, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/nouvelle-caledonie-darmanin-accuse-l-azerbaïdjan-d-ingerece-dans-les-emeutes-20240516#:~:text=les%20autres%20articles-,Nouvelle%20Cal%C3%A9donie%3A%20Darmanin%20accuse%20l'Azerba%C3%AFdjan%20d'ing%C3%A9rence,Bakou%20d%C3%A9nonce%20les%20accusations%20C2%A9Binfond%C3%A9es%20BB&text=Le%20ministre%20de%20l'Int%C3%A9rieur,des%20C3%A9meutes%20in%C3%A9dites%20depuis%201988,16-05-2024>.

3 <https://www.collectivites-locales.gouv.fr/institutions/collectivites-doutre-mer#:~:text=Le%20statut%20de%20la%20Nouvelle,titre%20XIII%20de%20la%20Constitution>.

4 Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, “Understanding the Caledonian Crisis”, *Daily Post*, 06-27-2024.

The Noumea Accords also provided for the organization of three referendums in 2018, 2020 and 2021. It was the loyalists, hostile to independence, who won these three referendums with very high turnouts, more than 81% for the first two. In 2021, this stance was once again confirmed but with a lower participation rate of 43.87% due to Covid. In 2018, 56.4% were hostile to independence, in 2020, 53.6% and in 2021, 96.5%.

An important element of France's commitment in the Pacific

New Caledonia, a French overseas territory in the South Pacific, is an essential part of the French presence in the Pacific, the importance of which was highlighted in France's Indo-Pacific strategy launched in 2018.⁵ This territory was populated by 271,000 inhabitants in 2021. The Melanesians, mainly Kanaks, represent 41% of the population, the Europeans, either descendants of former convicts or settlers (the Caldoches) or more recent arrivals, represent 29% of the population. 19% of this population is Wallis and Futunan or Asian (including Japanese and other ethnic groups), and 8% declare themselves mixed race or refuse to define themselves.⁶

New Caledonia, which contributes to making France the second maritime power in the world due to its very important EEZ, is at the heart of the deployment of France's power projection capabilities in the area with a sovereignty force of 1,450 soldiers.⁷ This presence also constitutes

an important element of French diplomacy and cooperation in the Pacific, including with Japan. Thus, the very important Brunet-Takamori land force exercises took place in 2023 in New Caledonia. From September 10-30, 2023, a 400-strong force – 350 French and 50 Japanese soldiers – jointly trained to control a force of 160 men in a tropical zone with amphibious operations.⁸ This involved improving interoperability as well as enhancing Japan's ability to defend remote islands, one of the priorities of the archipelago's defense strategy. Likewise, the Franco-Japanese Oguri-Verny maritime exercises take place off the coast of New Caledonia.

In addition, New Caledonia, like French Polynesia, has been a member of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) since 2016. Created in 1971, this forum brings together 18 Pacific states and territories. France is also active with its territories within the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, and regards its overseas territories in the Pacific as essential for strengthening regional cooperation due to their strategic location, the size of their maritime domain and the resources at their disposal.

The pre-positioned forces also make it possible to participate in relief operations in the event of natural disasters as part of the FRANZ system. The FRANZ partnership, which brings together France, Australia, and New Zealand, was set up in 1992 to unite in helping disaster-stricken populations in the Pacific. It organizes cooperation in emergency relief for the benefit

5 <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/strategies-regionales/indopacifique/indopacifique-8-questions-pour-comprendre-la-strategie-de-la-france-dans-la-65258/#:~:text=La%20strat%C3%A9gie%20fran%C3%A7aise%20en%20Indopacifique,Indien%20et%20le%20Pacifique%20Sud.>

6 Pauline Verge, "New Caledonia: four indicators of population fractures", *Les Echos*, 05-17-2024.

7 Christophe Kerdode, Dylan Martin, "Why do Middle Powers Project Forces in Distant Regions? The Case of France in the Indo-Pacific", *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, vol.20, n° 1, 01-31-2024.

8 "FANC: unprecedented Franco-Japanese land training during the Brunet-Takamori 2023 exercise", <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/fanc-entrainement-terrestre-franco-japonais-inedit-lors-exercice-brunet-takamori-23#:~:text=This%20exercice%20land%20in%C3%A9dit%20s,reached%20the%20Japan%20cet%20%C3%A9t%C3%A9., 03-10-2023.>

of the region’s island states. The last major operation took place in 2023, following a cyclone in Vanuatu.

The role of Azerbaijan

The crisis in New Caledonia is of course not exclusively due to external intervention. The first Kanak revolt took place in 1878 and led to a severe repression of the Kanak population, with 1,500 dead and as many deported to Tahiti and other territories. Today, the nickel crisis triggered by collapsing prices and remaining social inequalities are fueling the frustrations of some Kanak separatists.

However, Azerbaijan’s support for these movements cannot be denied. This support is part of a process of escalating tensions with France since 2020. After his election in 2003, President Ilham Aliyev followed in his father’s footsteps by opening to Europe and France through a strategy of influence: “caviar diplomacy.” Azerbaijan, then considered stable, allowed Europe to diversify its energy supply from Russia thanks to the Southern Gas Corridor.

France was a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was tasked with finding a diplomatic solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In September 2020, Azerbaijan occupied a third of the Armenian enclave on its territory. In 2022, Emmanuel Macron declared that he would “never abandon Armenia.” In October 2023, during a visit to Armenia, French foreign minister Catherine Colonna signed a defense agreement on supplying arms to Armenia. Relations between France and Azerbaijan deteriorated considerably as a result. In December of the same year, a Frenchman was arrested for spying in Azerbaijan and two Azerbaijani diplomats were expelled from France.

President Aliyev, who was reelected for

the fourth time on February 7, 2024, chose to support independence movements in France as a means of retaliating against France and President Macron’s strategic choices in the Caucasus. While chairing the Non-Aligned Movement in 2023, Azerbaijan supported the Baku Initiative Group formed by pro-independence personalities from French overseas territories and departments – Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, and French Polynesia, in addition to New Caledonia – calling for “decolonization.” The inaugural conference, organized by the Center for Analysis of International Relations, took place on July 6 during the Baku Non-Aligned Summit. The round table was dedicated to the French colonies. The Non-Aligned Movement was called upon to define new objectives to “support the people fighting against colonial domination.” Three representatives of the New Caledonian independence party FLNKS were present, as were representatives of other French overseas departments and territories.

Continuing this strategy of supporting independence movements, a memorandum of cooperation was signed in April 2024, a few weeks before the outbreak of the riots in New Caledonia, between the Congress of New Caledonia and the National Assembly of Azerbaijan to “make the international community aware of the right of the people of New Caledonia to self-determination.” Azerbaijan’s support has also been manifested on social networks through anti-French propaganda publications.

This support from Azerbaijan can be explained by a desire to destabilize the French presence in New Caledonia, motivated by mutual resentment between Paris and Baku over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. We can also imagine that Russia is not hostile to this strategy, which weakens France’s legitimacy in the Pacific, while Emmanuel Macron, as on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, has taken very forward positions against autocracies and on the

war in Ukraine.

China: interested and cautious

The case of China, which is increasingly active in the Pacific, is different from that of Azerbaijan. Beijing is continuing its strategy of diplomatic, economic and strategic influence with the island states and territories of the region, relying on the concept of the Pacific Silk Road. Economically, New Caledonia is the fourth largest producer of nickel in the world, after Indonesia, the Philippines and Russia. However, operating costs are high and mining conditions are difficult, while the price of nickel on world markets is low. Beijing has therefore chosen to step up its investment in Indonesia, which has become the world’s first competitive nickel producer. Today, China is no longer New Caledonia’s main market for nickel.

However, a New Caledonia without a French presence would potentially be of strategic interest to China by increasing its influence in the Pacific, especially in the face of groups such as AUKUS. An independent New Caledonia, like other states in the region, would need substantial funding, which the PRC could potentially provide, at the risk of falling into a debt trap like other states in the region, from Fiji to Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Since 2016, the Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association has been led by two chiefs of staff to the pro-independence president of New Caledonia. Unlike Azerbaijan, however, China did not openly support the unrest in the spring of 2024. On the other hand, a weakening of France’s image in the region could serve China’s interests. We note that in Vanuatu, very close to the PRC, several hundred people demonstrated in front of the French embassy on June 7, 2023, to denounce France’s “colonialism” in New Caledonia.

The causes of the turmoil in New Caledonia are multifactorial and related to long-term issues. However, for reasons with limited connection to the situation in the territory,

Azerbaijan has chosen to support the independentist movement. China has more direct strategic interests in the region but, despite being increasingly assertive in the South Pacific, it adopted a more prudent attitude by not demonstrating very visible or strong support for the most recent demonstrations.

Beyond the territorial question in New Caledonia, the political instability that has prevailed in France since the dissolution of the National Assembly on June 9, 2024, and the uncertainties about the future of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy can only reinforce the fragilities of the only sovereign European country in the region.