

A Certain French Stubbornness: Violence in New Caledonia

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*France's **Emmanuel Macron** can, at times, show himself at odds with the grime and gristle of grounded politics. Able to pack in various snatches of philosophical reflection in a speech, straddling the highs and lows of a rhetorical display, his political acumen has, at times, deserted him.*

Nothing is more evident of this than his treatment of New Caledonia, a Pacific French territory annexed in 1853 and assuming the title of a non-self-governing territory in 1946. Through its tense relationship with France and the French settlers, the island territory has been beset by periodic bursts of violence and indigenous indignation. Pro-independence parties such as L'Union Calédonienne have seen their leaders assassinated over time – **Pierre Declerq and Eloi Machoro**, for instance, were considered sufficiently threatening to the French status quo and duly done away with. Kanak pro-independence activists [have been butchered](#) in such confrontations as the Hienghène massacre in December 1984, where ten were killed by French loyalists of the Lapetite and Mitride families.

As for Macron, New Caledonia was always going to feature in efforts to assert French influence in the Indo-Pacific. In 2018, he visited the territory [promising](#) that it would be a vital part of “a broader strategy” in the region, not least to keep pace with China. Other traditional considerations also feature. The island is the world's [fourth ranked producer](#) of nickel, critical for electric vehicle batteries.

In July 2023, Macron declared on a visit to the territory that the process outlined in the Nouméa Accord of 1998 had reached its terminus. The accords, designed as a way of reaching some common ground between indigenous Kanaks and the descendants of French

settlers through *rééquilibrage* (rebalancing), yielded three referenda on the issue of independence, all coming down in favour of the status quo. In 2018, the independence movement received 43% of the vote. In 2020, the number had rumbled to 47%.

The last of the three, the December 2021 referendum, was a contentious one, given its boycott by the Kanak people. The situation was aided, in large part, by the effects of Covid-19 and its general incapacitation of Kanak voters. Any mobilisation campaign was thwarted. A magical majority for independence was thereby avoided. The return of 97% in favour of continued French rule, despite clearly being a distortion, became the bullying premise for concluding matters.

The process emboldened the French president, effectively abandoning a consensus in French policy stretching back to the Matignon Accords of 1988. With the independence movement seemingly put on ice, Macron could press home his advantage through political reforms that would, for instance, unfreeze electoral rolls for May 2024 elections at the provincial and congressional level. Doing so would enable French nationals to vote in those elections, something they were barred from doing under the Nouméa Accord. New Caledonian parliamentarians such as **Nicolas Metzdorf** [heartily approve](#) the measure.

On May 13, riots broke out, claiming up to seven lives. It has the flavour of an insurrection, one unplanned and uncoordinated by the traditional pro-independence group. Roadblocks have been erected by the Field Action Coordination Cell (CCAT). It had been preceded by peaceful protests in response to the deliberations of the French National Assembly regarding a constitutional arrangement that [would inflate](#) the territory's electoral register by roughly 24,500 voters.

Much of the violence, stimulated by pressing inequalities and propelled by more youthful protestors, have caught the political establishment flatfooted. Even Kanak pro-independence leaders have urged such protestors to resist resorting to violence in favour of political discussions. The young, it would seem, are stealing the show.

Macron, for his part, promptly dispatched over 3,000 security officers and made a [rushed visit](#) lasting a mere 18 hours, insisting that, "The return of republican order is the priority." Various Kanak protestors were far from impressed. Spokesperson for the pro-independence FLNKS (Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front), **Jimmy Naouna**, made the sensible [point](#) that, "You can't just keep sending in troops just to quell the protests, because that is just going to lead to more protests." To salve the wounds, the president promised to lift the state of emergency imposed on the island to encourage dialogue between the fractious parties.

Western press outlets have often preferred to ignore the minutiae about the latest revolt, focusing instead on the fate of foreign nationals besieged by the antics of desperate savages. Some old themes never dissipate. "We are sheltered in place because it's largely too dangerous to leave," Australian Maxwell Winchester [told](#) CNN. "We've had barricades, riots ... shops looted, burnt to the ground. Our suburb near us basically has nothing left."

Winchester describes a scene of desperation, with evacuations of foreign nationals stalling because of Macron's arrival for talks. Food is in short supply, as are medicines. "Other Australians stranded have had to scrounge coconuts to eat."

René Dosière, an important figure behind the Nouméa Accord, [defined](#) the position taken

by Macron with tart accuracy. Nostalgia, in some ways even more tenacious and clinging than that of Britain, remains. The French president had little interest in the territory beyond its standing as “a former colony”. His was a “desire to have a territory that allows you to say, ‘The sun never sets on the French empire’.”

For the indigenous Kanak population, the matter of New Caledonia’s fate will have less to do with coconut scrounging and the sun of a stuttering empire than electoral reforms that risk extinguishing the voices of independence.

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Featured image: RNZAF returning New Zealanders and approved foreign nationals from New Caledonia (Licensed under CC BY 4.0)

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