

New Caledonia Crisis Reveals France as Increasingly Aggressive Neocolonial Power

By [Uriel Araujo](#)

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On Tuesday, Paris lifted a state of emergency it had declared two weeks ago in its overseas territory of New Caledonia. France, however, is maintaining a night curfew and is also reportedly sending another 480 paramilitary gendarmes, in a development that is not getting that much press coverage internationally. Restrictions are being eased on the main pro-independence FLNKS party. This was a response to about two weeks of unrest and riots, with food shortages and millions of dollars' worth of damage. Last week, French President Emmanuel Macron flew to the archipelago in an attempt to diminish the turmoil, much to no avail.

The Melanesia archipelago of Nouvelle-Calédonie or New Caledonia (native pro-independence groups prefer to call it Kanaky), located in the southwest Pacific Ocean, about 1,200 east of Australia, is part of the so-called Overseas France or France ultramarine (France d'outre-mer), which is a generic term for about 13 French territories outside of Metropolitan France (and outside of Europe). Those are basically the remains of the French colonial empire, which remained part of France after decolonization, in different ways and

under various statuses.

New Caledonia is an interesting case of its own. It was annexed by Paris in 1853. Since the 1998 Nouméa Accord, it has been a “statut particulier” (or sui generis) collectivity. Although it is one of the EU’s Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs), it is not part of the European Union itself. It has a population of about 270 thousand people. According to the 2019 census, about 40% of its population is part of the Kanak people, an indigenous Melanesian ethnic group. Only 24% report belonging to the French European community, while other (minority) groups, such as the Javanese, Algerian, and others, also make up the archipelago’s diverse population.

The political unrest was mostly triggered by a complicated and controversial voting reform which would grant voting rights to over 12,000 people belonging to the local population and more than 13,000 French citizens who have lived there for at least 10 years. Since the aforementioned 1998 Nouméa Accord, over 40,000 European French nationals have moved to New Caledonia. Even though the reform was supposedly intended to grant the Kanaks better political representation, with its intricacies, it could result in almost one in five voters becoming disenfranchised, some claim. With the new law, the total number of voters could increase by 14.5%, but such a scenario troubles many Kanak groups, most of which support independence. They worry about losing electoral weight with a reform they see as an ethnopolitical maneuver to further marginalize them.

Such reasoning makes sense, after all, there have been thus far three recent referendums on independence in the archipelago. At the first two, Paris loyalists won by a tiny margin, whereas the 2021 referendum was boycotted by the Kanaks due to pandemic restrictions. Politically speaking, the future of that territory remains debated, with a new referendum being discussed.

Macron has halted the reform which triggered what he described as an “insurrection”. Reportedly, over 2,700 gendarmerie and police authorities will be employed in the archipelago to maintain order, in any case.

Now, one can try to imagine for a moment how much different the Western press coverage and Western leaders’ reactions would be if a similar crisis were to unfold involving not Paris, but, say, Beijing or Moscow dealing with ethnopolitical unrest over voting rights in some “overseas territory” (if such analogous situation existed at all – a few short-lived settlements aside, Russia for instance never had ultramarine colonies).

One does not need that much imagination: sure enough, already in 2022, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, a US government agency, part of the part of the US Helsinki Commission, published a report called “[Decolonizing Russia: a moral and strategic objective](#)” – the title is quite self-explaining: it is about dismantling the Russian [multinational federation](#) (Article 3 of the Russian Constitution) for geopolitical purposes. That in itself was not new in fact: the late **Zbigniew Brzezinski**, influential diplomat and national advisor, famously called for the further fragmentation of Russia (after the collapse of the Soviet Union). In his 1997 Foreign Affairs [piece](#), he called for a “loosely confederated Russia – composed of a European Russia, a Siberian Republic and a Far Eastern Republic.” Brzezinski advocated all this while also speaking about “America’s global primacy”, of course.

Back to France, it currently faces its own [geopolitical crisis in Africa](#) today, as exemplified by the recent disasters in Niger, Mali and [Chad](#). Five military agreements with France were

revoked by the Nigerien military government in August last year, and the last contingent of the 1,500 troops Paris deployed in Niger left in December.

Military presence in Africa and voting rights of native ethnic groups in the Pacific are not the only political issues haunting Paris. Both the West African CFA franc, and the Central African CFA franc are colonial currencies issued by Paris to this day – CFA standing for “Communauté Financière Africaine” (French for “African Financial Community”). Since 1945, the notes have been produced by the Bank of France at Chamalières.

As I [wrote](#) before, this monetary situation, with a fixed exchange rate, has [affected](#) Central African and West African economies, according to Landry Signé, a senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. And it has sparked demonstrations and anti-French sentiment in various African countries. In this context, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is planning to introduce its own common currency for its members by 2027.

Today, discourses on “decoloniality” and “woke” agendas are increasingly part of the (US-led) Euro-Atlantic alliance’s soft power, which is quite ironic. It is hard to imagine a US Commission report calling for the “decolonizing” of France as a “moral objective”, for that matter. It would not be too far-fetched, however, to describe Paris today as an increasingly aggressive neocolonial power. The crisis in New Caledonia is a clear example of a French colonial Empire’s contested legacy that remains unresolved – and thousands of gendarmerie are not going to solve it.

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Uriel Araujo is a researcher with a focus on international and ethnic conflicts. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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