

Settled French territory or powder keg: what next for New Caledonia after failed bid for independence?

While French politicians are hailing the result of the referendum as 'final', indigenous Kanaks say their future is anything but settled



A woman signs before voting in a referendum in Noumea, New Caledonia, 12 December.

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In the wake of the third New Caledonian referendum on independence from France, French president Emmanuel Macron declared that “France is more beautiful because New Caledonia decided to stay.”

The vote in the 12 December referendum – supposedly the finale of a 30-year process of preparation and consultation – was an overwhelming 96.5% against independence.

Macron’s centre-right Republican rival, Valérie Pécresse, has hailed the vote a “massive choice” to stay, while the emerging far-right candidate Eric Zemmour said the decision was final.

But New Caledonia’s future as a French territory is anything but settled and a return to the violence that wracked New Caledonia a possibility.

Only one side turned up to vote, and the result was entirely predictable. Only 43.9%

The abstainers were mostly indigenous Kanaks, who have been agitating since the 1980s to follow their fellow Melanesians in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu into independent statehood.

Until recent months, the Kanaks were willing participants in the consultation process, then the Delta variant of Covid-19 arrived in early September, quickly infecting over 12,000 people and causing 280 deaths, about 60% among Kanaks, and other Pacific islanders.

Many Kanak communities were plunged into traditional mourning rituals that can take up to a year. In addition, a lockdown restricted campaigns by Kanak parties, which typically rely on villages meetings and tours by leaders.

The Kanak parties appealed to Macron to postpone the referendum but he refused. A last-minute court appeal for delay also failed. So the Kanak coalition called a boycott of the referendum.



Residents wait to vote for the referendum on independence outside a polling station of the City Hall in Noumea.

“This isn’t over, and people who are saying it’s over are misreading the strength of the boycott,” says Nic Maclellan, a veteran commentator on Pacific affairs in Australia.

Not only did nearly all Kanaks heed their parties’ call for “non-participation” they did so peacefully. Paris had sent 2,000 extra gendarmes and 30 armoured cars to maintain security – they were not needed.

A key question now is whether electoral rolls in any future referendum or local government elections will be thrown open to more recent arrivals to New Caledonia. Until now, only Kanaks and long-established settlers have been allowed to vote.

To open the vote to all the residents of New Caledonia would be “recolonisation” and definitively end the Kanak dream of independence, said Mathias Chauchat, professor of public law at the University of New Caledonia in Noumea.

“In essence, opening the electoral roll would give power to the whites. It would revert to the colony like before, with the French in power and the Kanaks like an aboriginal minority. They would be left with their customs on the margin, all the while saying that their identity was recognised. It would be a system of apartheid that doesn’t say its name.”

“The situation is explosive because the Kanaks would never accept this recolonisation,” Chauchat added. “We are on a powder-keg. It needs only a spark for it to explode.”



Support for independence remains strong among Kanaky communities, like the tribe of N'Dé, in the Commune of Païta.

For their part, the seven pro-independence parties based among the Kanaks said dialogue had been broken by the “stubbornness” of the French government, which had been “unable to reconcile its geo-strategic interests in the Pacific with its obligation to decolonise New Caledonia.”.

New Caledonia’s regional neighbours have dismissed the referendum result. The Melanesian Spearhead Group – representing Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji – issued a statement proclaiming the results “null and void due to the ‘non-participation’ of the indigenous people of Kanaky.”

The Pacific Islands Forum – a wider regional grouping – noted the boycott and said that “civic participation was an integral component of any democracy and critical to the interpretation and implications of Sunday’s poll.”

While some strategists worry about France walking out, leaving a destitute mini-state open to Chinese influence, it is worth considering exactly what kind of independence is being proposed by the Kanaks.

Chauchat said the Union Calédonienne, one of the main Kanak parties, has been considering the “free association” link of the Cook Islands to New Zealand, whereby Wellington looks after the islands’ defence and foreign policy in consultation with the Cook Islands government. The small nation has membership of many international agencies, though not a UN seat.

Adrian Muckle, a historian at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, said another Kanak party, UNI-Palika, had also evoked in its manifesto the idea of a partnership or association with France.

“They have sought to discuss in advance of the final referendum what that might look like in more detail, but Paris and ‘loyalists’ have actively refused to engage, suggesting that such discussions could only take place after a vote for independence and that nothing can be discussed until then,” Muckle said.

“Their concern, I think, is that any fleshed-out ideas on independence-in-association might make a ‘yes’ vote more attractive.”

Since the vote, Sébastien Lecornu, France’s minister for overseas territories, has called for submissions on a permanent status for New Caledonia within France, to be finalised within 18 months. The Kanak parties have said they will wait until after next year’s French elections before resuming dialogue with Paris.

They would have little traction until then anyway. With Macron now fighting for re-election from the centre against the right and far-right, electoral considerations will not allow much flexibility in thinking about New Caledonia’s future.

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