



A Decolonisation Test for France in the Pacific: The Third Referendum on Independence in New Caledonia

Part 1: The Controversial Vote

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The Nouméa Accord of 1998 proposed a consensually negotiated interim governing framework in New Caledonia after intercommunal violence in the 1980s. Its final stages included one, and potentially up to three, referenda on the exact future status of the country. The first two referenda, held in 2018 and 2020, resulted in slim majorities against independence, but had stronger showings for independence than observers expected. The third referendum, originally planned for 2022, was rushed ahead to 2021. Kanak independence parties were experiencing a COVID-19 pandemic crisis and thus boycotted the referendum, resulting in an abstention rate of 56 per cent. Part 1 of this In Brief miniseries provides some background to the Nouméa Accord and reflects on the third referendum controversy. Part 2 examines the possibilities being discussed for New Caledonia's future political status.

Background to the Nouméa Accord

After the unilateral taking possession of New Caledonia by France in 1853, Paris decrees shaped the territory's colonial history, during which 90 per cent of Indigenous Kanak lands on the main island were alienated for a convict penitentiary, nickel miners, cattle ranchers, coffee planters and indentured labourers from Asia and Polynesia. In 1946, the Kanak finally received citizenship, voting rights and the freedom to leave their segregated tribal reserves for employment, join labour unions and support political parties. Paris granted the country autonomy in 1957, but it soon withdrew that status to retain control over nickel mining during the profitable US war in Vietnam, which had caused a nickel boom in New Caledonia. New immigration made the Kanak a demographic minority, sparking an independence movement that culminated in intercommunal violence in the 1980s. The first successful negotiations between local leaders and Paris officials followed, leading to the Nouméa Accord of 1998, which was enshrined in the French national constitution. The Accord began a transitional period of restoring many self-governing powers and holding

possibly multiple referenda on independence. Its three key provisions were restricting the electorate to long-term residents on important issues; proportional power-sharing in the Congress and executive cabinet; and favouring the two rural provinces (Northern and Islands) with development aid (Chappell 2013). The more populous, prosperous, migrant-dominated Southern Province resented those constraints, but pro-independence parties regarded the third independence referendum in 2021, which Paris imposed earlier than expected — during a pandemic outbreak and despite a Kanak boycott — as old-style colonialist.

Third Accord referendum held during the COVID-19 pandemic

In 2018, the year after his election win, French President Emmanuel Macron visited New Caledonia, France's autonomous but *sui generis* (unique) special collectivity in the Pacific, to engage in conciliatory gestures. He supported creating 'a sovereignty within a sovereignty' by fulfilling the Nouméa Accord's delegation of increasing powers of self-government to the country and by organising three successive referenda to decide whether New Caledonia would become sovereign and independent ([LNC 4/5/2018](#)). The first two referenda, in 2018 and 2020, drew voter turnouts of over 80 per cent. Instead of the landslide win opponents of independence had predicted, they won only slight majorities, while proponents of independence won 44 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively, and hoped to mobilise even more 'yes' votes in the third referendum.

Yet in June 2021, after the overseas minister had first proposed that the third referendum would occur in October 2022, then French prime minister Jean Castex met separately in Paris with each of the leading New Caledonian political parties and unilaterally moved up the date for a third and final referendum on independence to 12 December 2021. Castex said the goal was to avoid distracting voters' attention from the May–June 2022 French presidential and legislative elections. Yet in 1987, then president Jacques Chirac had held a referendum in New Caledonia just before

the 1988 French national elections; that vote was boycotted by 80 per cent of the Kanak, and the 1988 elections only brought more violence. This time, pro-independence parties pleaded for the original date of late 2022 the overseas minister had proposed because they needed more time to mobilise their campaign, in accordance with the precedent of having such referenda every two years ([Trépiéd 21/12/2021](#)). Meanwhile, the country lifted pandemic air travel restrictions, causing a community outbreak in September and a lockdown that was extended into October as thousands contracted the virus and hundreds were hospitalised ([RNZ 6/6/2022](#)). The Kanak Customary Senate endorsed traditional year-long funeral rites for well over a hundred Kanak deaths ([Whaap and Madec 9/11/2021](#)).

By late November, New Caledonian President Louis Mapou of the pro-independence majority in the government executive promised to pursue 'the process of decolonisation and emancipation begun in 1988' and assured the public that 'there is room for everyone in New Caledonia' ([Skoupsky 25/11/2021](#)). He thanked medical personnel for their brave handling of the pandemic health crisis, which infected over 12,000 residents. Regarding the upcoming referendum, he suggested, 'If there is a winner, it can only be the country' (*ibid.*). Kanak parties finally called for a boycott, because even healthy people were concerned about voting safely, and the Customary Senate declared the referendum date a day of mourning. Since the United Nations (UN) had inscribed New Caledonia on its list to decolonise in 1986, Congress President Roch Wamytan and other Kanak leaders expressed their concern to the UN Special Committee on Decolonization, explaining why the 'colonised people' would not participate in the third referendum. But the UN did not intervene ([Nooton 10/12/2021](#)). Local historian Louis-José Barbançon ([Le Monde 25/11/2021](#)) warned that without the Kanak:

this consultation would conserve its legality, but would lose its legitimacy, because it would decide the destiny of the country without the original people. It's not just part of the electorate who refuses to participate, it's the Kanak, the people most concerned.

Nevertheless, Paris proceeded, and on 12 December, 41 per cent of the electorate voted against independence and two per cent voted for it, but a telling majority of 56 per cent abstained ([Trépiéd 21/12/2021](#)). The sudden, unilateral change in the date of the third referendum was called a 'hold up' (robbery), 'institutional violence' and a 'moral error', and Kanak leaders refused to do any further negotiating until after the metropolitan presidential and legislative elections in 2022 ([Mannevy 20/11/2021](#)). Despite the minority vote against independence, French President Macron proclaimed, 'France is more beautiful because New Caledonia has chosen to remain part of it' ([Trépiéd](#)

[21/12/2021](#)). His overseas minister would tell the UN Special Committee on Decolonization that the third referendum process was 'exemplary': 96.5 per cent of voters who participated said 'no' to independence. Moreover, the transition period of the 1998 Nouméa Accord was thus completed, and after further 'exchanges of perspectives' among stakeholders, it was thought that a final referendum in June 2023 would formalise the new status of the country within France ([Massol 18/11/2021](#)).

Congress President Roch Wamytan of the Caledonian Union (CU) party, which ran the country for a generation in the 1950s and 1960s, still supports full sovereignty. He said of the third referendum, 'we've returned to the beginning ... this was the referendum of France and its supporters, not ours' ([franceinfo 12/12/2021](#)). Gilbert Tyuienon of the CU said that Paris had ceased to be an 'impartial arbiter, because it wanted to take charge again ... it's a huge mistake ... a legal void' ([Le Monde 21/12/2021](#)). The fact that 56 per cent of eligible voters failed to cast their ballots in the third referendum, compared to over 80 per cent participation in the first two referenda, led Mathias Chauchat, a law professor at the University of New Caledonia, to argue that France did not follow proper UN procedures, which should include offering more choices of future status than simply 'yes' (independence) or 'no' (the status quo). The rushed third referendum 'did violence to the Kanak', who were sincerely in mourning due to the pandemic: 'what it tossed into the river is the identity of the Caledonian people', whose self-government had been evolving for 30 years ([Mannevy 20/11/2021](#)). For over a generation, Paris officials had preached that the diverse local populations needed to develop a 'common destiny'. Violating key principles of consensual negotiation and collegial leadership was equivalent to the betrayal of a treaty. Part 2 of this series sets out the next steps towards resolving New Caledonia's political status, including the role of the 'Oceanian' (Polynesian migrant) vote.

Author notes

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