



# A Destiny by Choice: New Caledonia's Riots in 2024

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DOI: 10.25911/3CFE-CZ10  
24 October 2024

In a speech delivered less than a year ago in Nouméa, New Caledonia, French President Macron stated, '35 years ago, nothing was written. What you were able to do was to rise above the worst of events, the worst of fears and the worst of divisions; together, we were able to preserve peace ... it is a treasure' (Élysée 26/7/2023). On 13 May 2024, the eruption of violent disturbances across the Greater Nouméa area<sup>1</sup> served as a reminder that the continuation of civilian peace in New Caledonia (NC) is the result of a deliberate and collective decision. This is equally true of its cessation. This crisis is situated within the historical context of the 'Kanak revolts' (1878, 1917 and 1980s) and a broader regional trend of increased political violence, characterised by a prevalence of urban riots due to grievances with the state and to ethnic conflicts (Ride 21/11/2022). In particular, the quasi-civil war of 1984–88 in NC led to the attainment of the highest degree of autonomy<sup>2</sup> within the French Republic, and the promise of an independence referendum. The decolonisation process, one of the most protracted of the 20th century, has manifested in the creation of an agency in charge of the retrocession of customary lands, the reallocation of control of the nickel industry, an institutional design that, in retrospect, has favoured 'independentists' interests<sup>3</sup> and the organisation of a cycle of three referendums on self-determination (2018–21). Despite these efforts, the ongoing unrest poses a dilemma between the process of decolonisation and democracy. Indeed, the French state has proposed a constitutional reform for provincial elections in favour of an electorate defined by 10 years residence on the basis of economic contribution and social embedding. In this way, Paris appears to equate the political legitimacy of this new electorate with that of a millennial society and a 170-year settlement bound by a 'common destiny'. Furthermore, the political legitimacy of two referendums (2018, 2020) marked by an 80 per cent turnout is equated with that of the last referendum in 2021 which achieved a 43 per cent turnout due to the abstention of supporters of independence. In light of mounting antagonism between the loyalists (pro-France), the French state and the independence movement, how should we make sense of their power struggle? This Working Paper will attempt to elucidate the underlying factors that precipitated this upheaval,

the subsequent repercussions, and the positions of the various actors involved, up until 13 June 2024.

### Income gap

Despite the state-funded improvement of infrastructure to rebalance the socio-economic fabric inherited from the colonial era (i.e. the status of natives known as the *Indigénat*, despoliation of land etc.), through the accords of Maignon-Oudinot in 1988 and Nouméa in 1998 (which provide for the transfer of powers to New Caledonia by the French state), the Kanak people (41% of the population) have a lower standard of living than Europeans (24%). They are less educated with only 8 per cent holding a two-year diploma compared to 50 per cent of Europeans. As a result, they are less privileged, comprising 71 per cent of the poor and 70 per cent of the unemployed (Wéry 8/12/2021). Despite the '400 leaders programme',<sup>4</sup> a training scheme created in 1988, there is a greater representation of Kanak in prisons than in positions of responsibility, even when comparing individuals with equal education. Concurrently, NC is regarded as a prosperous territory in the region, due to its mineral resources and the financial support of the French state. In fact, it is endowed with the highest GDP (gross domestic product) per capita of the French overseas territories, approaching the level of New Zealand. Nevertheless, this affluence has accentuated the perception of socio-economic disparities, which are worse than in the majority of island states (MacLellan 17/5/2024). The wealthiest 10 per cent of individuals earn eight times the income of the least privileged 10 per cent. This is perpetuated in the modern era by the lack of redistributive policies undertaken by local authorities, and compounded by a high inflation rate, which, despite the price controls put in place, hits the lowest income households the hardest. Consequently, a profound sentiment of social injustice (Barthou 23/5/2024) among the Kanak community,<sup>5</sup> in comparison to other communities, has impeded the emergence of a 'common destiny' as outlined in the Nouméa Accord. This sentiment partly explains the riots related to the takeover of the Goro nickel plant in 2020–21, which can be considered as a precursor to the latest upheaval.

In the 1980s, the ‘Events’ were largely confined to the so-called bush area (Kanak-majority areas of the rural north and Loyalty Islands). However, following the internal migration of the least privileged people (mostly Kanak) over the past 40 years (Blugeon-Mered 17/5/2024), this current riot occurred predominantly in Greater Nouméa, where the inequality and discrimination are most pronounced. Nouméa encompasses opulent villas of Europeans in the southern suburbs, working-class areas and slums of Oceanic islanders in the north, with the vital industrial area of Ducos and the Magenta airfield in between. The riots can be understood as an ‘expression of the invisible members of society’ (Mobilisation pour la liberté 15/5/2024), driven by economic frustration and the sincere political activism of young Kanak. This goes beyond the characterisation of opportunistic looting by idle, barbarian and racist (Nathan 28/5/2024), drunk and manipulated youth. Young Kanak support the independence movement against what appears to be the state reverting to colonial practices (Trépiéd with Delaporte 21/5/2024). However, they perceive the unrest of the 1980s through the lens of a romanticised heroism, and appear to have overlooked the lessons that could be gained from it (Peteissi 28/5/2024).

### Political tensions

The mere selection of a date for any consultation on self-determination is subject to intense political calculation. Although the third referendum was supposed to be held in 2022, some independence parties were eager to organise it at an earlier date. The objective of the Palika party (moderate) was to circumvent the risk of Marine Le Pen (the French nationalist figure, traditionally opposed to independence) winning the 2022 French presidential election (Poigoune and Poaouteta 15/11/2020), and the Union Calédonienne (UC) agreed to set the date for December 2021. However, the independence leaders eventually requested a six-month postponement, citing the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>6</sup> in early September as a barrier to regular campaigning and voting. Despite this, the French state decided to hold the third referendum at the end of 2021, without the agreement of the independence parties. This decision was made on the assumption that the pandemic was under control, and perhaps in the hope of gaining a political advantage (Merle 20/11/2021) — in the event that the territory remained French — in the lead-up to the French national elections in 2022. Those opposed to independence invoked the economic emergency to propose the vote be held as early as possible, in order to provide predictability for businesses. In response, the pro-independence parties chose to not participate in the vote, adopting a stance of ‘passive resistance’. This resulted in a 56 per cent abstention rate, in comparison to the 14 per cent recorded during the previous referendum in 2020. In fact, the series of referendums has exacerbated the political and ethnic fault lines (Pantz 24/3/2022), with European people essentially favouring integration into France and

indigenous people favouring independence. Ultimately, this consultation on decolonisation fails to represent the colonised indigenous people. Consequently, it lacks both historical and political acceptability. Nevertheless, the loyalists and the state, as confirmed by the French Supreme Court (Conseil d’État 3/6/2022), maintain that the third referendum was legally valid, and that the independence issue has been settled.

The composition of the electoral list for special elections is of even greater consequence. The formation of the local provincial assemblies, Congress and government is derived from the provincial elections. For these elections, the Nouméa Accord has established an electoral roll that is ‘frozen’ to the ‘historical’ inhabitants (and their descendants) who had been residing in NC for a minimum of 10 years to 1998. As a result, an estimated 43,000 individuals are currently disenfranchised from participating in these special elections. This figure mostly comprises French newcomers, including those born in the archipelago, but also Kanak who have resided abroad. Yet a proportion of these individuals has a material and moral connection<sup>7</sup> to NC, while contributing to the taxation system and the social safety net that benefits all residents equally. In 2023, they represented 19 per cent of the voters registered on the rolls for the national elections (presidential, legislative, municipal, European, referendum), a significant increase from 7 per cent in 1999, and this proportion is likely to continue to grow over time (Rimane et al. 29/4/2024). This exclusion is a key reason for the strong feelings of inequity held by anti-independence supporters. Their representatives and the French state have emphasised that this derogation from the constitutional principles of equal and universal suffrage is intended to be limited to the transitory decolonisation process.<sup>8</sup> In reality, the argument that the restricted electoral roll is ‘anti-democratic’ fails to take into account the historical setting: the 100 years of trauma experienced by the indigenous people under the *Indigénat* regime. The Kanak were obliged to pay a head tax, while being deprived of any rights (Belanyi and David 24/5/2024) afforded to the Europeans, including the right to vote. Therefore, the affirmative action in terms of electoral rights reserved for the ‘New Caledonian citizens’ is designed to repair (Merle 01/6/2024) the past, soothe the aftermath of the deadly conflict of the 1980s and prevent further ‘colonial settlement’ (Conseil d’État 26/12/2023).

Similarly, there is a restricted electoral body for the three self-determination consultations. Despite the exclusion of numerous loyalist supporters, the ‘yes’ vote for independence has technically not succeeded. France’s national Supreme Court subsequently determined that the decolonisation ‘process initiated by the Nouméa Accord is now complete and can be considered as having been fully implemented’ (Conseil d’État 26/12/2023). Consequently, the temporary provisions on the electoral lists should be terminated. Yet the accord continues to apply until a new statute is adopted. It cannot be unravelled

(Belanyi and David 24/5/2024) in the meantime, since it was constitutionalised by an organic law of 1999. Nevertheless, the state has indicated its intention to partially ‘unfreeze’ the electoral roll for the next provincial elections, to comply with its political obligations under the French constitution and its international commitments. Otherwise, there is a risk that the elections will be invalidated, according to the central government.<sup>9</sup> However, should the Conseil d’État rule on the regularity of these elections, it would have to give precedence to constitutional provisions over international commitments.<sup>10</sup> Since only the constitution can restrict the voting rights of French citizens, a constitutional bill was introduced in January 2024 to recognise a voting right for people locally born and 10-year residents (the period of which is counted prior to the forthcoming election). This would add 25,800 voters to these special elections. The bill was adopted by the Senate on 2 April and the National Assembly on 13 May. The final endorsement is still to be made at the national level, either by a three-fifths majority vote of the Congress of Versailles (which brings together both legislative houses) or by referendum.

However, the French state launched this constitutional procedure prior to reaching a comprehensive agreement with local politicians, who were reluctant to agree because voter eligibility is at the core of differences between the two political groupings in NC. Yet the accords had initiated a tripartite (loyalists, French state, independentists) negotiation method. Following three negative referendums on self-determination, the partners should negotiate a new statute to replace the Nouméa Accord.<sup>11</sup> After the National Assembly passed the bill, and with the outbreak of violent protests in NC on 13 May 2024, President Macron decided not to convene the Congress of Versailles immediately and instead invited the parties to engage in further discussions, with the objective of reaching a consensus. In the absence of an agreement, he had planned to resume the constitutional procedure by late June, prior to the Olympic Games. The loyalists therefore have an incentive to elude a difficult agreement with independentists to advance their case (Segaunes 22/5/2024), because they expected the Congress to pass the electoral reform. Since the outbreak of unrest, however, the three-fifths majority required at the Congress was unlikely to be achieved. Some lawmakers, including those from the presidential group, expressed opposition to this bill. Furthermore, the 6–9 June European parliament election resulted in a significant defeat for Macron’s Renaissance alliance, which led him to abruptly dissolve the National Assembly on 9 June. This in turn led to the suspension of the Congress vote on the bill, as the new Assembly alone would have to pass the bill again (Gouret 10/6/2024). Consequently, a distant European election with a record high abstention rate of 87 per cent in NC has unexpectedly disrupted the electoral overhaul. Instead of involving the Congress of Versailles, the President had earlier ‘threatened’ to convene a national referendum. However, French mainland voters have

limited knowledge about NC’s political reality<sup>12</sup> and are likely to vote for or against Macron’s performance, and his popularity is declining in opinion polls. Conversely, while New Caledonians are the least able to be objective in addressing the issue, the rest of the sovereign nation has no say on this matter; yet the national taxpayer is funding the functioning and now the reconstruction of the collectivity (Descheemaeker 15/5/2024).

Despite the prevailing tensions, the independentist and loyalist parties reached an understanding in 1998 (Descheemaeker 19/3/2024). The former group accepted long-term European settlers as ‘historical New Caledonians’ (1983 Nainville-les-Roches declaration), while the latter acknowledged that only those who had been resident for a significant period could be granted New Caledonian citizenship. However, the proposed electoral unfreezing would result in the erosion of this citizenship (Lalié 21/5/2024). In contrast to the state and pro-France parties, the pro-independence camp has rejected this reform,<sup>13</sup> as its implementation would undoubtedly result in a shift in the balance of political power in favour of the loyalists. This may result in the marginalisation<sup>14</sup> of Kanak leaders and Kanak people from local institutions, as with indigenous minorities — with a comparatively smaller share of the population — in Australia and New Zealand, should they fail to convince voters beyond ethnic divisions. Nevertheless, a FLNKS (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front) delegation<sup>15</sup> agreed to discuss a 10-year residency requirement (while loyalists requested 3 years and the minister of home affairs, 7 years), as well as the inclusion of individuals born<sup>16</sup> in NC of parents who were not voters in 1998, but only as part of an overall accord covering the institutional arrangement and the nickel industry.

### Escalatory phase

As in the 1980s,<sup>17</sup> the state’s ‘firmness’ on the timetable and the electoral roll has given rise to a number of disputes (Barbançon 23/3/2024). The two most recent overseas ministers since 2020 have carried out the third referendum (Sébastien Lecornu) and set the unfreezing ‘ultimatum’ (Gérald Darmanin) to prompt negotiations on decolonisation. In addition, the French state has recruited divisive anti-independence leaders from New Caledonia: Sonia Backès was simultaneously secretary of state for citizenship and president of the South Province, while a deputy in the National Assembly, Nicolas Metzdorf, sponsored the controversial bill. Consequently, the expected impartiality of Paris has been called into question, which has led to a breakdown in trust between pro-independence leaders and the two other parties. The Kanak leaders cannot tolerate political as well as economic sidelining, which they perceive as an existential threat. The ineffectual approach of moderate Kanak leaders to oppose the pro-France determination is enabling second-tier actors lacking a political mandate (JNC 24/5/2024) to implement a more confrontational approach. In November 2023 the Union Calédonienne (UC), the most influential

independence party, established the Coordinating Unit for Field Actions (CCAT) to demonstrate against the constitutional bill. The objective is to achieve full access to sovereignty without further accommodation or postponement, going through three phases: mobilisation, occupation and civic disobedience (JNC 24/5/2024). On 13 April 2024, the organisation held significant demonstrations in Nouméa with an estimated 30,000 supporters of the independence movement, in opposition to 20,000 loyalists. Together, both sides represented 18 per cent of the population (which, per capita, is equivalent to rallies of 4.8 million citizens in the Australian context).

Despite the CCAT leaders' utilisation of young Kanak (Gallien-Lamarche 31/5/2024), they were unable to maintain control over them (Charrier 16/5/2024). The unit launched the 'Ten Days for Kanaky' movement on 3 May. On 13 May, riots broke out while the National Assembly was examining the constitutional reform. Approximately 9000 rioters engaged in looting, arson and violence against 500 companies, public buildings, infrastructure and private residences. Additionally, they erected roadblocks and engaged in conflict with security forces, thereby precipitating urban guerrilla warfare in the Greater Nouméa area. In the following month, more than 100 security personnel were injured, nine people were killed by gunshot, including seven civilians and two gendarmes, and a few individuals died from the lack of access to health facilities. The fatality rate of this urban riot makes it one of the deadliest in the region for the past two decades (Ride 21/11/2022). It is estimated that 5000 individuals have lost or are at risk of losing their jobs. The damage caused is preliminarily evaluated to be worth \$1.6 billion (this figure exceeds the GDP of Solomon Islands) according to the local Medef (employer organisation). This equates to 16 per cent of the total GDP (\$10 billion) of NC. By some measures, therefore, the consequences are more severe than those of a natural disaster.

### **Painful aftermaths**

The disturbance has resulted in the disruption of a full range of activities, including the distribution of food, water, electricity and gas, as well as the operations of post offices, banks, hospitals and pharmacies, schools, waste collection and even prisons. While the local government immediately asserted that there was sufficient food for two months, the riots caused shortages of essential supplies, leading to a temporary humanitarian risk. This is due to the paralysis of 80–90 per cent of the goods distribution network in the urban area, where 180,000 people reside. Consequently, city dwellers have been compelled to ration and protect their grocery stores. In response to the emergency, the local government dispatched food convoys via semitrailers or barges, established a forward medical station and resumed online consultation and classes. Some businesses reopened in the second or third week, but they were still required to limit the amount of purchases per customer. Despite this, there were reports of illegal practices, such as price gouging and discriminatory access to food.

Furthermore, the turmoil resulted in the suspension of civilian transportation. This included maritime shuttles, domestic flights operated by Air Calédonie and Air Loyauté out of Magenta airport, and international commercial flights from La Tontouta until 5 June. Over three weeks, 185 international flights were cancelled, affecting 20,000 travellers. Consequently, approximately 3000 individuals were stranded. One week after the outbreak, after days of waiting, Australia and New Zealand were authorised to send military airplanes to evacuate from Magenta airport some 430 Australians, 250 New Zealanders and a number of citizens of Pacific Island states. Normally reserved for domestic flights, this airport is located on the Nouméan peninsula. In contrast, the Route Territoriale 1 to La Tontouta international airport, situated 60 kilometres from the capital, has been repeatedly disrupted by blockades and up to 76 roadblocks. French navy ships delivered food and medicine to the North Province. Some local students from outside Nouméa were repatriated by maritime shuttles, along with ni-Vanuatuan students via French military aircraft. Tahitians were repatriated two weeks after the outbreak, followed by some Wallisians. Some French mainlanders waited several weeks. It would appear that repatriation was prioritised according to citizenship, regardless of logistical capacities. In the absence of cars, buses or taxis two weeks after the start of the chaos, people simply walked or cycled in Nouméa. As in a case of emergency due to a natural disaster, this event gives the military another reason to remain in place.

At the time of writing, the population of Greater Nouméa was experiencing a sense of despair. Some individuals felt as though they were hostages, as if they were trapped in a state of COVID-19 lockdown, due to the continued presence of unsafe conditions that prevented them from venturing outside. This was particularly evident in the suburbs of Nouméa, even three weeks after the outbreak, with conditions similar to a state of war. Some felt exhausted and abandoned as the security forces were still anticipated or occasionally deployed. In response, residents have formed neighbourhood committees and taken turns to guard their own barricades, seeking to protect their relatives, properties and businesses. These civilian committees have been instrumental in mitigating the level of devastation. Some militias (Guibert 21/5/2024) are alleged to have engaged in anti-Kanak hunting, although there is contested evidence for this. Nevertheless, they have been asked to conceal their weapons, which are prohibited as well as the barricades, and to soften their narrative to journalists. Since the inception of militias in both camps in the 1980s, in conjunction with the popularity of hunting and shooting sports, there may be up to 100,000 weapons (including the illegal ones) in circulation in the archipelago (Rimane et al. 29/4/2024). The number has increased since the last referendum. Consequently, some roadblocks, operated by both residents and rioters, were confiscating weapons. Fortunately, stone

throwing ('the poor man's weapon') is, in reality, much more prevalent than shooting.

Economically, the riots could have a paralysing and cascading effect. The economic environment has been adversely affected by the pandemic (despite the rebound in 2022) and by inflation, amid a nickel crisis with currently one inactive and two faltering nickel plants. The ongoing protests have not facilitated the operation of these plants (Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie 8/6/2024). The nickel sector represents the primary economic engine of NC, generating 20 per cent of its GDP and contributing to social funding. The 'nickel pact' of the national minister of economy, Bruno Lemaire, is designed to save the industry and make it more sustainable. The French state requested that pro-independence authorities renounce the 'nickel doctrine', a value-adding strategy designed to limit the export of raw nickel in favour of semi-finished products, which has led to chronic debts. However pro-independence leaders view such plans as a means of recolonising the economy (Blugeon-Mered 17/5/2024). The state would temporarily reassume control over nickel,<sup>18</sup> which independence fighters expect will provide a springboard to independence. In the long term, Paris may seek to redirect mineral exports from Asia to Europe in order to meet the high demand in the context of the energy and digital transition (IGF 2024). Despite the challenging economic circumstances, the FLNKS has opposed the agreement, in contrast to the independence-led government, which is mandated to address the situation.

Furthermore, the reconstruction costs will place additional financial strain on the society as whole, which is already burdened by a debt ratio of 170 per cent (AFP 10/04/2024). The local government announced a deferral of corporation tax payments for companies whose production tools were no longer operational (without counting the thousand other companies that were collateral victims of the clashes (Polynésie la 1ère 31/5/2024)); the insurance companies are asked to contribute, and the national Ministry of Economy will allocate a solidarity fund covering half of the amount needed. The local government is seeking assistance to meet the costs of unemployment benefits. There is concern that without the support of France, the local economy will collapse (Outre-mer la 1ère 7/6/2024). With such support, the local government will become even more dependent on the state for financial support (17% of the local GDP). This would be similar to Tonga's reconstruction using Chinese loans after the 2006 riot (Ride and Zhang 2024), which were partly aimed at Chinese interests. A contingent economic crash could initiate a shift towards a vision based on the revival of communal resilience and on a level of self-sufficiency provided by the vast rural (bush) and marine (lagoon) areas. This possibility was temporarily experimented with during the pandemic, which was paradoxically amplified in the Kanak population by the communal way of living and vaccine scepticism (Ministerial Committee to New Caledonia 2/2/2022). In this scenario, the

underprivileged people who are willing to challenge the status quo by destroying the social and economic facilities that should benefit them would have to phase out their consumer expectations accordingly.

Ultimately, this catastrophe could not only repel tourists and investors (including those seeking a more secure nickel supply, such as the European Union (EU)), both vital for the local economy, but also skilled and well-off residents, whose assets represent markers of socio-economic inequality. It seems likely that the social animosity, political uncertainty and high living costs could spark a definitive exodus of non-native Europeans, or deter their immigration. A reduction in the size of the European minority would have a negative impact on France's leverage with New Caledonia. The disturbances have created a profound sense of distrust among the population, with rioters and victims sometimes acquainted with one another. Some have lost faith in the concept of 'shared destiny' and were prepared to fly away as soon as the airport reopens. Many are likely to relocate to Australia or French Polynesia. Between 2014 and 2023, 19,000 people left the country (Mazzoni 23/11/2023). Such demographic change could ultimately result in the Kanak's share of the population and thus their political influence rising.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, pro-France supporters claim that their opponents are resorting to violence in order to terrorise European people and pursue a coup d'état in disguise (Vandendyck 21/5/2024), instead of engaging in a battle of ideas and ballots. This prompts us to question the extent to which these actions have been planned: is there a scorched-earth<sup>20</sup> strategy at play?

## French state response

Despite several warning signs, the events of May 2024 appear to have taken the French state by surprise. Home Affairs Minister Gérald Darmanin characterised the CCAT as a 'mafia' and an 'organisation of thugs', omitting the political nature of the situation. This may have been a strategy to deflect criticism of his inability to anticipate and then handle the riots (Derel 19/5/2024). Furthermore, the minister accused Azerbaijan of meddling after signing a memorandum of cooperation in April with the local congress<sup>21</sup> and disseminating online disinformation regarding police brutality during the riots. The objective of this Caucasian country seems to be to discredit France, given its support for Armenia in the Karabakh conflict (Leloup 16/5/2024). However, the social media posts did not generate engagement, thus their effect has been very limited. In any case, a bill aimed at better countering foreign interference (Demarthon 21/5/2024) was under discussion until the recent dissolution of the French National Assembly. The bill proposed online monitoring and an obligation for foreign lobbyists to register. Could the applicability of such an arrangement to French overseas territories result in Paris exerting greater control at the expense of New Caledonian autonomy?

On Thursday 16 May in Nouméa, the national government announced a 12-day state of emergency.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal declared that the Olympic flame would not be transported to New

Caledonia on 11 June. The state of emergency enabled the prime minister to provisionally restrict certain public liberties<sup>23</sup> in the name of safeguarding public order. In addition to the curfew, enforced with a heavy fine, in place until at least 17 June, the decision entailed the house arrest of some 15 CCAT leaders, a ban on public gatherings, alcohol sales and weapon transport, and a ban on access to TikTok until 28 May. This was the first extensive ban on TikTok for France, and indeed for the EU. The authorities defended this measure on the basis that the app provided a medium for rioters and, potentially, foreign disinformation. In practice, this ban was easier to implement in NC because there is only one local telecom operator (Di Stefano 21/5/2024). However, this move may give rise to accusations of the state's double standard, unless the ban could be replicated in mainland France as recommended by a Senate enquiry in 2023. Furthermore, it fuels the portrayal of France's illiberal approach (Reynaud and Leloup 16/5/2024) to international civil rights like freedom of speech and access to information. Indeed, this restriction appeared disproportionate, being in principle aimed at 'terrorism' (Di Stefano 21/5/2024). The platform could further moderate specific content; however, it has not been requested to do so. Furthermore, there are several alternative American social media sites in NC that remain untouched, and in any case, any platform could have been used to help victims of riots. Perhaps this measure was mainly intended to give credence to the allegations of foreign interference in the chaos. In addition, NC was the target of an unclaimed inbound cyberattack, just after the announcement of Macron's visit. On Tuesday 21 May, millions of emails were sent to saturate the sole telecom operator. This attack, suspected to have been carried out by Russia (Grare 12/6/2024), was stopped before it had a significant effect.

Adding to the countermeasures already outlined, the Ministry of Home Affairs<sup>24</sup> dispatched reinforcements from France (and French Polynesia), including counterterrorism special forces, via an air bridge. In total, approximately 3700 gendarmes and police were mobilised, supported by some of the 1450 soldiers onsite. This corresponds to a ratio of 13.8 internal security personnel for every 1000 inhabitants at the local level, in contrast to 3.3 at the national level. In other words, the number of law enforcement officers per capita is currently four times greater in NC than in France. The military has been deployed primarily to secure the strategic transport infrastructure<sup>25</sup> to enable the delivery of supplies and, crucially, security reinforcements (JNC 24/5/2024). The gendarmes and police attempted to reopen the roads and secure urban neighbourhoods. However, the first reinforcement arrived two days after the beginning of the unrest, after the most destructive phase, without accounting for the recovery time from jet lag. Over the next three weeks additional support forces arrived. It is unlikely that any foreign police intervention from the region would be feasible on this 'domestic matter', regardless of how the internal sovereignty of France is questioned by the upheaval. What if regional

leaders were to activate the regional crisis mechanism under the Biketawa Declaration (RNZ 31/5/2024)? This happened with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003. In his remarks, Macron indicated that these additional troops could remain in place until the Olympic Games in Paris (July–August 2024). Although the games necessitated a significant contingent of security personnel in both France and French Polynesia (where the surfing event was held), those deployed in NC include specialised units (Albertini 22/5/2024) that may not be necessary for the security of this sport event. However, in the event of a human assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operation in the region (in late May, Papua New Guinea was affected by a landslide, while Vanuatu experienced an earthquake), the capacity of the French military forces in New Caledonia (FANC) to respond was limited.

With regard to the distribution of powers in NC, the French state retains control of the security realm, yet encounters difficulties in ensuring this responsibility. Their lack of anticipation, even while tensions had been simmering for some time, was further compounded by their inability to quickly restore order. One week after the chaos began, state representatives were prompt to claim a progressive return to a calmer situation. However, this claim was contested by pro-France figures, as feelings of insecurity and anxiety among the population remained high (Tarahui-Arnold and Michaud 28/5/2024). Hence the rationale for deploying civilian groups for self-defence. Even three weeks after the initial disturbances, there were still lawless pockets characterised by clashes, explosions, fires and blockades. It took almost three weeks for the state to claim the 'taking back' of the whole of Nouméa (Polynésie la 1ère 31/5/2024), after launching an operation against the last neighbourhood controlled by the CCAT, one of the most populous in Nouméa, Rivière-Salée. Following an initial two-day period of severe destruction and a week in which the deaths of most of the victims occurred, violent disturbances persisted in localised areas. This is notably longer than such occurrences of urban riots elsewhere in the Pacific region, most of which lasted one or two days, very few lasting for a week or longer (Ride 21/11/2022). This prompts the question: How prepared is 'the balancing power'<sup>26</sup> for a more intense crisis, whether military or humanitarian, occurring in the Indo-Pacific region, including the French territories? Moreover, it reveals a grey area in the conduct of military coordination in a French territory, as foreign military aircraft were made to wait a considerable period of time before receiving approval for evacuation.

Against the backdrop of criticism, Paris is keen to restore 'Republican order' and is willing to do so through the substantial use of force and strict sanctions. This is particularly the case in the advent of a key event such as the Summer Olympic Games, which would provide an international platform to denounce 'French neo-colonialism'. However, the security response<sup>27</sup> aimed at paving a way to peace may well spiral out of control, as was the case during the 1984 state of

emergency in NC. This déjà-vu scenario may explain why the state of emergency has not been extended. Nevertheless, the ongoing unrest in its own dependency will undermine France's objective of providing regional stability (George 20/5/2024), in the form of security (the FRANZ agreement on disaster relief) and sustainable development (Agence française de développement). The death toll and perception of excessive use of force, as well as the rejection by a significant part of the population of the French presence as illegitimate, impacts the acceptability of France as a self-proclaimed 'Melanesian State' in the framework of its Indo-Pacific strategy launched in 2018 (Vincent 3/6/2024) (the release of the latest version may be delayed by the current instability in NC). Any missteps in NC could serve to reinforce the anti-colonial rhetoric against double standards (Reeves 29/5/2024). The manner in which this crisis is handled and concluded could set a precedent among overseas territories.<sup>28</sup>

Faced with a highly inflammatory situation, President Macron in mid-May convened three Defence council meetings in less than one week. When independence leaders declined a video talk with the president, he made an exceptional visit to NC on Thursday 23 May (the third time in his presidency), despite being engaged on several other fronts. This is reminiscent of François Mitterrand's unexpected visit in 1985 (AFP 23/5/2024).<sup>29</sup> Macron took the risk of exacerbating tensions as the CCAT prepared a 'welcoming committee'. During his 17-hour stay, the president opened dialogue with the controversial CCAT leader, Christian Téin, who promised to 'loosen the grip' and clear the roads, in exchange for the termination of the state of emergency and house arrests. Subsequently, President Macron initiated the formation of a mediation mission, a strategy previously employed in the lead-up to the Matignon accords in June 1988. He gave a month to take stock of the situation. The mediation mission is not conducted by the overseas minister but, instead, directly by the prime minister, and it involves three apolitical senior civil servants under the authority of the state. This mission aims to reach a comprehensive accord (encompassing the future institutions and the rescue of the nickel smelters), but it has left NC with discussions at a standstill (Mainguet 13/6/2024). The French state could not afford to leave an unresolved 'frozen conflict' that is destined to resurface, as this could have a detrimental impact on its Indo-Pacific legitimacy. Otherwise, it is noteworthy that this ordeal provides an opportunity for national politicians to take a stance against colonialism (on the left) or disorder (on the right), with the next presidential election in mind.<sup>30</sup>

### Local politicians' posturing

Both camps are echoing each other's perspectives in a feedback loop.<sup>31</sup> Based on the fear of victimisation resulting from a perception that wrongdoing is benefiting the opposing side, they both invoke 'resistance' with external support. Loyalists deplore institutional rebalancing in favour of Kanak and anti-white racism,

while independence supporters resent the dominance of Europeans in corporate positions and potentially also in politics. The first group is attempting to garner support from French nationals (Backès 28/5/2024) to pressure the president to proceed with the vote on the controversial bill. The latter is attracting regional<sup>32</sup> and international sympathy to sustain pressure on the 'administering power' for decolonising the collectivity (Wright 24/5/2023). They may attempt to piggyback on the defence of western values in the Indo-Pacific or the international call for the self-determination of Palestine. While the European Court of Human Rights could rule in favour of applicants excluded from the provincial vote in New Caledonia, Kanak representatives await an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on their challenge to the validity of the last referendum. In the competition to project influence beyond the archipelago, loyalists are isolated among the Pacific Island states. As was the case in the 1980s, they fear being left behind by the French state.

Locally, the most vehement politicians are employing a bloc strategy to mobilise supporters from different factions in their own camps. They use a radicalising rhetoric and wilfully describe adversaries as being irresponsible. Some loyalist actors frame society's resilience against the riots as a values battle: 'democracy against dictatorship' (Darame and Guibert 22/5/2024) or against 'terrorists'<sup>33</sup> actions' (Tejero 21/5/2024). Sonia Backès (Les Loyalistes) asserts that independentists espouse a vision of 'ethnic superiority' (Backès 31/5/2024), while Roch Wamytan (UC) was quoted as saying 'the tolerance threshold for white people has already been reached' (Rimane et al. 29/4/2024) when referring to the flow of immigration from mainland France. Radical loyalists advocate for strict sanctions against rioters, while their independentist counterparts denounce a 'repression' (Caprais 7/6/2024). Alternatively, the loyalist leader states that New Caledonians were 'the first' to support the resistance against Nazism in World War II (Backès 28/5/2024) to appeal to the national audience, whereas Daniel Goa (UC) describes the riot control measures implemented by the French security forces as 'worthy of the Gestapo' (Tejero 10/6/2024). In this context, the reconciliation process is impeded by deep political mistrust and some intercommunal hatred. Despite the general disappointment of the population with political leaders across the board, the gravity of the situation does not seem to prompt the various political parties to transcend their internal and external quarrels. None has been able to prevent this foreseeable drama, and none has sufficient authority to curb tensions. No political renewal has yet emerged.

In fact, there is no consensus between or within the two sides as to the way forward. There is a difference in opinion regarding the necessary sequence of events: public order first then political agreement, or the other way round. Among non-independence leaders, the radical faction (Les Loyalistes-Le Rassemblement) has called for the finalisation of the electoral reform, citing the withdrawal of the bill as 'siding with the thugs

and the looters'. 'In a republican country, violence is never a substitute for the ballot box and the will of the people', states Nicolas Metzdorf (Tejero 21/05/24). The loyalists would prefer a local discussion to a dialogue mission from mainland France. The moderate right leaders (Calédonie Ensemble) advocate for a dialogue mission to strike a comprehensive agreement and postponement of the contentious reform (Chenais 21/4/2024). The moderate pro-independence factions (UNI-Palika) did not support the blockades and expressed a desire to engage with the mediation mission (Le Tenneur and Vergès 29/4/2024). In contrast, the radicals of the UC, of which the CCAT is an offshoot, were slow in publicly disavowing the excesses (this circumspection may reflect a fear of assassination by extremists of the Kanak leadership, as occurred with Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1989) and seek a continuation of the mobilisation (ibid.). In addition, the UC refused to meet the dialogue mission. The FLNKS has frequently called for the withdrawal of the bill and the convening of an impartial dialogue mission, which should include trusted senior political figures, with the exception of the overseas minister, whom they seek to delegitimise. They advocate a political agreement that sets a pathway towards a new and genuine self-determination referendum (Naouna 30/5/2024), provided that the third one is invalidated. For some, the ultimate objective is to reach an 'interdependent' state (MacLellan 17/5/2024), associated with France, following a possible 10 years of transition. In contrast, the UC has proposed that independence be declared on 24 September 2024.

Christian Téin, leader of the CCAT, projects the actions of his unit on to others. His rare calls for calm (Angaräa 16/5/2024) hardly overshadow his inflammatory rhetoric. He claims to have launched 'peaceful' actions for the construction of the country, and notes that 'we have brought eighty years of colonial economy to its knees' (Fillet 27/5/2024). Nonetheless, he places the blame for the violent 'phase III' on the French state. He appears determined to maintain pressure against what he perceives as the constitutional 'blackmail' of Paris to force the signing of an agreement, fearing to lose the mobilisation of his supporters and the unstable power he derives from it (nonetheless, his 'status' was enhanced by his discussion with President Macron). Even if it means the 'sacrifice' of 1000 (Rimane et al. 29/4/2024) or 10,000 (Fillet 27/5/2024) young Kanak for the independence cause.<sup>34</sup> It has been reported that there is a loose command chain between the political organisations (UC, FLNKS) and the CCAT, as well as between CCAT and its thousands of activists. In fact, CCAT managers have been described as competing with the FLNKS to pass propositions based on their 'political work', although they are not politicians (JNC 24/5/2024). For their part, young Kanak express a lack of trust in political leaders regardless of their ideology, as they feel neglected. They hold accountable older independence leaders, who have been in power since the accords, for the failure to attain independence

and to create employment opportunities (Godet 1/6/2024). They also accuse them of prioritising their own vested interests (Relais CCAT Pwoyta 1/6/2024). As a result, calls for calm from independence figures have been unsuccessful among young Kanak. This element provides elders with plausible deniability when responsibilities are raised.

## Conclusion

Regardless of future developments, the violent events that have taken place since 13 May 2024 are sobering. They mainly highlight the class gap between sections of society and the intergenerational conflict between Kanak. The riots have disrupted activities, generated immense material damage and precipitated an economic decline. In response, communities have organised self-defence bodies and resumed COVID-19 pandemic adaptation measures; visitors have been evacuated, with some European emigrants likely to follow. The extent of the damage is greater than that of a natural calamity because social cohesion has largely been fractured. The atmosphere is prone to the dissemination of unverified conspiracy theories: the recolonisation of the economy and politics, and the scorched-earth deterrence. For its part, the French state is exerting its monopoly on legitimate violence and control on freedoms, which may result in a guerrilla war that could persist and inflame the bush. This is undermining France's security guarantee to New Caledonians, and indeed Melanesian people as a whole, and endangering the acceptance of a French presence in the region. Concurrently, the weaponisation of foreign support as a political tool has given international resonance to a local issue.

The proposed electoral enlargement imperils the ability of the three parties to compromise. The situation epitomises existing grievances: the socio-economic exclusion of Kanak, the political limitation of Europeans and the partiality of the French state. By issuing an 'ultimatum', the state has put itself in a position where it has to choose between betraying its 'allies' and further alienating the First Nation people, by either pursuing or postponing the national vote on the electoral bill. This could result in one camp feeling compelled to submit to the other in order to facilitate a resolution (JNC 14/5/2024). Furthermore, each party denies responsibility for the predicament. It is yet to be determined which actors will gain a political dividend from the riots and their consequences. Should the insurrection and the European parliament election result in stalling the option of convening the Congress of Versailles to pass the electoral bill, it remains unclear whether the crisis has provided the necessary wake-up call to prevent ongoing brinkmanship. The removal of the December 2024 deadlines (Segaunes 22/5/2024) for constitutional reform and the provincial election would be more conducive to reaching a consensus.<sup>35</sup> Those in a position of constructive leadership should advocate for a comprehensive agreement that reconciles social justice and political representation, provided that they



choose to (re)construct a New Caledonian spirit of togetherness and restore the treasure of peace.

## Author notes

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## Endnotes

1. The city of Nouméa, the main urban centre in New Caledonia, is situated within South Province, along with the suburbs of Mont-Dore, Dumbéa and Païta.
2. The political violence of the so-called 'Events' of 1984–88 represents a pivotal point in New Caledonian history. The 'peace accords' of Matignon-Oudinot in 1988 and Nouméa in 1998 ended and contained the conflict. Similarly, it took a bloody war for Papua New Guinea to concede an advanced level of autonomy to Bougainville in 2000.
3. For instance, the distribution of both congressional seats and the budget determined in 1998 have resulted in a current imbalance in favour of the Loyalty Islands and North Provinces (governed by pro-independence leaders), at the expense of the South Province (ruled by pro-France leadership), due to the internal migration towards the latter.
4. The '400 managers' training program was a result of the Matignon peace agreements in 1988. The aim of the program was to rebalance Caledonian society and enable 400 Kanaks to rise to positions of responsibility.
5. A mere 11 per cent of the Kanak community is classified as middle class. While the majority of poor are Kanak, there are also many poor Wallisians and Europeans in the squatter settlements. New Caledonia's Gini index (0.43) is higher than that of countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Argentina, El Salvador, Kenya, Nigeria, the United States and Russia.
6. The Kanak community was the most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, with 280 deaths recorded in late 2021. This reflected the disadvantaged condition of the Kanak people. While this tragedy led to the adoption of a year-long customary mourning period that prevented Kanak people from campaigning and participating in elections, it did not prevent the Union Calédonienne from running for the legislative election in 2022.
7. This rootedness is put in doubt in the context of the emigration of non-native populations, which occurred at the earliest stages of instability in the nickel boom and during the series of referendums (Castex 20/10/2022).
8. See the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Py v. France*, 2005.
9. In order to avoid alienating both local camps, Paris proposed a compromise involving a partial unfreezing (reducing the number of excluded voters from 20% to 8%). However, this still perpetuates two categories of citizens, which contravenes the democratic principle of one person, one vote.
10. Not to mention that France is also committed to two pacts of 1966 which proclaim the right of peoples to self-determination and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (Belanyi and David 24/5/2024).
11. Article 5, Accord de Nouméa, 5/4/1998.
12. But this did not prevent the national referendum from endorsing the 1998 Nouméa Accord.
13. As they boycotted the 1987 referendum, which was open to people with three years of residency.
14. Or one might posit a 'counter-rebalancing' given that the independentists currently control 20 districts out of 33, two provinces out of three, the presidency (the first time in the local history) of the collectivity and one senator out of two.
15. Gathering of four left-wing independentist parties including Union Calédonienne (radical), Palika and Union Progressiste en Mélanésie (moderate).
16. Nevertheless, this does not preclude France from applying a derogation to *jus soli* (citizenship determined by birthplace) to counter destabilising Comorian immigration, in the case of another French collectivity, Mayotte, where disruptive roadblocks are also routinely used to send a political message.
17. The same unilateral decisions, namely the Lemoine Statute in 1984 and the Pons Statute in 1987, led to the Events.
18. This recalls the 'Billotte' laws of 1969 which recognised state control over mining prospecting and investments.
19. The results of the 2024 census may indicate that Kanak are becoming the majority population, in line with a trend that commenced prior to the riots (Castex 20/10/2022).
20. In 1984, the Fayaoué tourist centre was burned down by the independentists as a result of their frustration at not benefiting from it.
21. This is part of the FLNKS strategy of reaching out for international support.
22. A state of emergency has been implemented on six occasions in French history: the 1955 Algerian insurrection, the 1984 New Caledonian 'Events', the 2005 revolt in France, the 2015 terrorist threat and the 2020 pandemic.
23. While President Macron, through the French Indo-Pacific strategy, promises 'real sovereignty' in the form of guaranteed individual freedoms and collective autonomy, as opposed to a very hypothetical Chinese takeover.
24. The Oversea Ministry is located within the Home Affairs Ministry, which reflects a perception that the unruly overseas population should be 'tamed' through the implementation of special law enforcement.

25. The deployment of soldiers in the midst of civil unrest would reinforce the claim of colonial militarisation, which occurred after the election of Jacques Chirac as prime minister in 1986 during the Events.
26. Since the conference of French ambassadors in September 2019, the French head of state has sought to position France as a 'balancing power' in the Indo-Pacific region.
27. A total of 800 persons were apprehended, with only 60 being detained (mostly Kanak). The Camp-Est prison is currently overcrowded and was affected by mutinies during the first days of the unrest. Hence the transfer of prisoners to Koné (North Province), French Polynesia, and mainland France.
28. National lawmakers from four other overseas collectivities support the deferral of the vote on the constitutional bill.
29. The president's ad hoc visits (e.g. the Beirut explosion in 2020) did not meet the expectations that had been set (Segaunes 22/5/2024).
30. The Minister for Home Affairs and Overseas Territories, Gérald Darmanin, has been reluctant to assume responsibility for the current impasse. Marine Le Pen has expressed support for a new referendum in 40 years, a stance that diverges from the traditional position of her party. Former prime minister Édouard Philippe highlighted the necessity for a prime minister to oversee the decolonisation process, citing the 'tradition' before 2020.
31. In this regard, loyalist deputy Nicolas Metzdorf has reappropriated the words of independentists, stating that 'the hardest part is not to die, it's to feel like a foreigner in your own country' and 'I try not to hate'.
32. Political leaders in the region made measured statements. The Prime Minister of Vanuatu and Chair of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Charlot Salwai, was the most forthright: 'These events could have been avoided if the French Government had listened, and not proceeded to bulldoze the Constitutional Bill...' (Vanuatu Government 15/5/2024).
33. The term was first employed in the 1980s to describe the strategic manoeuvres of pro-independence actors.
34. This approach bears a little resemblance to the hardline rhetoric of Hamas. It is noteworthy that NC was among the first Pacific Island countries to host demonstrations in support of the Palestinian struggle for international recognition (18/11/2023).
35. Alternatively, could the aggravation of public disorder, political cleavages and economic downturn provide a sufficient rationale for Paris to assume control of the local administration?

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