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New Caledonia in turmoil

For France, the stakes are high. The reputational damage is already palpable in the region

Last week, riots erupted in New Caledonia as France's National Assembly debated a constitutional amendment aimed at enlarging electoral lists on the archipelago. The amendment proposal led to vast movements of protest in Noumea and further division within the population. On the day of the vote, it degenerated into violence. Shops, businesses and public infrastructure were damaged or destroyed and cars burned. Several people – six at the time of writing – were killed and many more wounded. France announced a state of emergency and dispatched extra security forces to New Caledonia, where operations to re-establish law and order are still going on.

The riots are already proving politically and economically disastrous. For Paris, they dashed the hope of a relatively smooth transition from the Noumea Accord. Signed in 1998, the Accord organised the transfer of powers from the French state in most domains except defence, justice, security and currency. Following the 2021 referendum, which rejected independence amid a boycott by the independence movement, the government's objective was to define a new status for New Caledonia within the French Republic — ready to deepen the autonomy of the archipelago. The political dialogue, which had resumed in July 2023 with the loyalists and the pro-independence movement was supposed to discuss a number of issues including local institutions, Caledonian citizenship and electoral body but also inequalities, as well as economic and financial measures.

The already uneasy dialogue stumbled on the issue of electoral lists. The Noumea Accord had frozen the latter, restricting the vote in the provincial elections to the people residing in New Caledonia in 1998 as well as to their descendants. Interestingly, the measure had been validated as a transitional measure by the French Constitutional Council, but also the European Court of Human Rights because it was 'part of a decolonisation process' and 'provided that it was indeed transitional.' Yet, 20 per cent of voters were being denied the right to vote, a situation violating the principles of equality and universality of suffrage. The

constitutional amendment proposing to impose only a 10-years residence period to be eligible to vote ignited the revolt on the pro-independence side, further polarising the situation. The political dialogue disappeared – at least temporarily – in the process.

Unlikely involvement

For France, the stakes are high. The reputational damage is already palpable in the region. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), a regional alliance created in 1986 to support the decolonisation of Melanesian countries, has blamed the French government for pressing forward its constitutional amendment. The MSG includes Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and the New Caledonian pro-independence FLNKS. Mark Brown, president of the Pacific Island Forum and prime minister of the Cook Islands, called for greater autonomy for the Kanak people. Several Pacific island leaders have criticised Paris for 'refusing to listen'. France has been trying for years to improve its image and to consolidate its partnership with both the South Pacific island states and their regional organisations. The sudden deterioration of the New Caledonian situation is unlikely to comfort its legitimacy as an Indo-Pacific power.

The insurrectional situation that prevails today on the archipelago has ,moreover, opened the way to foreign interference, which sometimes pre-existed the riots. The French government has denounced such interference from Azerbaijan. Indeed, in July 2023, the government of Azerbaijan instigated the creation of the Baku Initiative Group (BIG) which aims at supporting liberation movements against French colonialism. On 18 April, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Congress of New Caledonia and the National Assembly of Azerbaijan. Azeri flags were seen in demonstrations organised by the independence movement long before violence erupted and the BIG has since expressed its support to the Kanak people and condemned the 'French repression'.

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Foreign interferences are not the reason for the outbreak of violence. But the latter is instrumental in the policy of several external powers. In many ways, Baku's retaliations against France's support of Armenia are similar to Russia's anti-Western operations in New Caledonia and other parts of the globe. Banners welcoming Vladimir Putin or even asking him to free the colonies have been observed in pro-independence demonstrations. Russian anti-

French propaganda also circulates on social networks. Moscow's support of pro-independence movements is not new. It dates back to the USSR but has become more active since the invasion of Crimea in 2014. In the context of the war in Ukraine, New Caledonia's troubles are a blessing for Russia, which may be tempted to add fuel to the fire as it did in Africa.

Ultimately, experts and analysts assume that the main beneficiary of the current situation may, however, be a third party. China is seizing every opportunity to challenge Western influence in the South Pacific, where it tries to expand its political, economic and military influence. The support of island states in international organisations on issues ranging from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang to human rights more generally, but also the East and South China Seas matters to Beijing. China is also keen to exploit whatever natural resources the region can provide. And if Beijing's ultimate military intentions are still a matter of debate, many analysts suspect that the infrastructure it is building in several island states could be of dual use.

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After signing a security pact with the Solomon Islands in 2022, Beijing failed to secure a Pacific-wide trade and security deal but turned to other island states as well as to their regional organisations. Within public debate, it is said today to support the MSG financially and the latter is debating the possibility of a security cooperation with Beijing.

In China's efforts to seduce one island state at a time, troubles in New Caledonia act as a foil, supposedly demonstrating the nefarious character of French and Western presence. New Caledonia participates in China's indirect strategy. Beijing is eyeing New Caledonia's nickel reserves but also understands that any weakening of French influence is likely to facilitate its own regional designs.

From that perspective, the stakes in the New Caledonian issue go far beyond the sole national interest of France. The current situation is adding uncertainty to an already politically volatile environment. Both Paris and its allies have an interest in a quick resolution of the crisis. However, it is unlikely to be an easy process, as there are no obvious solutions to any of the issues at stake. The French government has reasserted its willingness to restore the dialogue with all parties. The end of violence is a pre-condition for the resumption of discussions. Both

loyalists and pro-independence movements have called their troops to calm down the situation. With limited success so far. Hence, the priority for the authorities to restore law and order for each operation poses an inherent risk of slippage. A painful but essential confidence-building process will then have to start. Compromise will be necessary on both sides.



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