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## Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2022 KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA

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► **To cite this version:**

Mathias Chauchat. Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2022 KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA. Contemporary Pacific, 2023, 35:1&2 (2023). hal-04313105

**HAL Id: hal-04313105**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04313105v1>**

Submitted on 29 Nov 2023

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#### KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA

The year 2022 was a year of immobility in New Caledonia. Nothing on the institutional, economic, or societal levels seems to have changed. New Caledonian society is as tense as ever. Dialogue between the French Government, the loyalist parties, and the pro-independence parties did not resume.

The political year began under the influence of the consultation organized only twenty days earlier, on 12 December 2021. This was the third consultative referendum provided for by the Nouméa Accord, and it returned an extremely surprising result: no to independence obtained 96.5 percent of the votes cast. However, not even half of eligible voters participated. The yes to full sovereignty recorded 2,747 votes, the no 75,720, and there were 103,483 abstentionists ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2021](#)).

The referendum was organized by Minister Sébastien Lecornu to put an end to uncertainty and relaunch discussions on the future of a definitively French New Caledonia. He kept the closed, yes or no question, “Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?” without discussing the third option of associated state offered by UN resolutions. The result was that everything was blocked.

On 1 April, the convention of the Caledonian Union, the most important

party in the pro-independence umbrella group Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), opened. Its president, Daniel Goa, set the tone: nothing more will change during the year. “This unilateral act,” he said, “proves to be a major political fault of France . . . . It relinquished its neutrality as an administering power . . . . The Nouméa Accord was to lead to our emancipation . . . . The Minister for Overseas France proposed we negotiate a ‘project referendum’ for June 2023 . . . . However, the Caledonian Union has nothing to negotiate, except to listen and to discuss the process of emancipation which will irreversibly lead to our sovereignty. The time has come to take action and break free. This is what we signed” (quoted in [Tromeur 2022](#); all translations from French are mine).

There were also legal disputes. The protest filed by the Customary Senate and the pro-independence parties before the Conseil d’État was unsuccessful. In a decision dated 3 June 2022, the Highest French Administrative Court rejected the request for the cancellation of the electoral operations ([Conseil d’État 2022](#)).

The pro-independence parties turned to the United Nations. The question of New Caledonia was the subject of a draft resolution adopted by consensus at the special committee on decolonization meeting on 24 June 2022 and then at the General Assembly on 12 December 2022 that “calls upon the administering Power,

in cooperation with the territorial Government and appropriate bodies of the United Nations system, to develop political education programmes for the Territory in order to foster an awareness among the people of their right to self-determination in conformity with the legitimate political status options, based on the principles clearly defined in Assembly resolution 1541 (XV) and other relevant resolutions and decisions” ([United Nations General Assembly 2022, 4](#)). This is a criticism in diplomatic terms of France’s position in favor of the no vote in the electoral campaign. The committee also stressed “the importance of the agreement between the signatories to the Nouméa Accord that the progress made in the emancipation process shall be brought to the attention of the United Nations” (7). The United Nations continues to follow the path of decolonization of New Caledonia and not of a permanent status within the French Republic. As a result, the United Nations “decides to keep under continuous review the process unfolding in New Caledonia as a result of the signing of the Nouméa Accord” (7). The pro-independence parties also sought to obtain a legal opinion from the International Court of Justice on the referendum process. However, the General Assembly has not yet ruled on this request.

The political year quickly turned to the French national elections. On 10 April, the first round of the presidential elections confirmed New Caledonians’ lack of interest in national elections. Less than a third of registered voters turned out to vote. The same five candidates as at the

national level came out on top: Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Valérie Pécresse. On 24 April, Macron, the outgoing president, won the second round against Le Pen with 61.04 percent against 38.96 percent in New Caledonia. Unlike in most other overseas territories, the result in New Caledonia was in line with the national trend (58.55 percent against 41.45 percent). On 16 May, the president appointed Elisabeth Borne as France’s prime minister ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2022c](#)).

The legislative elections for the two members representing New Caledonia in the French National Assembly followed on 12 and 19 June. The independentists played the game of unity. The nonindependence parties (Les Loyalistes and Calédonie Ensemble) partially united against the Rassemblement-Les Républicains and the far right Rassemblement National. The Rassemblement-Les Républicains was defeated in the first round. The outgoing members of Parliament, Philippe Dunoyer and Nicolas Metzdorf, under the label Ensemble Majorité Présidentielle (Presidential Majority Together), faced Wali Wahetra and Gérard Reignier of the FLNKS. Dunoyer retained his seat with 66.4 percent of the votes against 33.6 percent for Wahetra. Metzdorf won with 54.23 percent against 45.77 percent for Reignier. Hardly anyone participated in the national elections. Turnout was low (39.85 percent in the first constituency and 47.37 percent in the second) ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2022b](#)).

On 4 July, the Borne government was unveiled. Sonia Backès, leader of New Caledonia's loyalists and president of the Southern Province, was appointed to France's national cabinet as secretary of state for citizenship. She was attached to the minister of the interior and overseas territories, Gérald Darmanin. Jean-François Carencu was appointed associate minister in charge of overseas territories. He replaced Lecornu, who was promoted to defense. The reactions of the nonindependence side were positive, while those of the independence side were negative. Charles Washétine, spokesman for Palika (the Kanak Liberation Party), the second major pro-independence party of the FLNKS, declared that Overseas France attached to the Ministry of the Interior is "a step backward . . . It is similar to a rather assimilationist policy. Once again, on a symbolic level, the French state—Emmanuel Macron in particular—wants to mark its presence in the Pacific as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy" (quoted in [Mainguet 2022](#)). For Goa, the president of the Caledonian Union, "the French State will be biased in the discussions to come. When she speaks, Sonia Backès will speak on behalf of the State. It's another dimension. The State's game raises many questions" (quoted in [Mainguet 2022](#)).

There was no absolute majority in the National Assembly, and the national government of Borne had to permanently seek out thirty-nine missing votes to build a majority of 289 out of 577 members of Parliament. Moreover, the national Senate had a Les Républicains majority. Reforms would be difficult.

The paradox of all of these changes is that the New Caledonian political balance did not change. Pro-independence Louis Mapou, elected on 8 July 2021 as president of the local government, continues to lead in 2022 with the Oceanian majority (composed of the FLNKS and Oceanian Awakening, which represents mainly residents with roots in Wallis and Futuna), and Roch Wamytan was reelected speaker of the New Caledonian Congress on 30 August with the same majority.

Renewing the threads of dialogue in New Caledonia is very difficult. However, an emotional scene took place on 26 June, the anniversary of the handshake between Jacques Lafleur and Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the historic leaders who put an end to the "Events" (the violent unrest of the 1980s) with the Matignon Accord in 1988. The Place de la Paix (Peace Square) in Nouméa was inaugurated with the erection of a statue of the two men in place of the statue of Governor Olry, the symbol of the suppression of the Kanak uprising in 1878. The ceremony was opened by three women: Marie-Claude Tjibaou, widow of the pro-independence leader; Isabelle Lafleur, daughter of the former loyalist member of Parliament; and the (nonindependentist) mayor of Nouméa, Sonia Lagarde. The pro-independence parties were all there—a rare moment of unity ([Cochin 2022b](#)).

Jean-François Carencu, associate minister for overseas territories, came to Nouméa in September. He announced a "convention of partners" in Paris to discuss the country's status within in the French Republic. This convention, which was held on

28 October 2022 without the pro-independence parties, was a failure, as it only validated a working method with the nonindependentist parties. The convention agreed on eight working groups: institutional issues; equal opportunities and social cohesion; economic development, employment, and major investments; nickel; energy sovereignty; food and land sovereignty; values, common identity, and reconciliation; and regional influence ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2022a, 3](#)). The only pro-independence member who agreed to attend, Jacques Lalié, the president of the Loyalty Islands Province, lost his majority in December when the pro-independence groups refused to vote for his budget. He will be referred to the Caledonian Union's disciplinary committee ([Cochin 2022a](#)).

Darmanin, minister of the interior and overseas territories, visited New Caledonia from 28 November to 4 December. He met with all of the relevant parties. Above all, he accepted the principle of a direct and bilateral dialogue between the FLNKS and the French State. Moreover, he accepted that the discussions would only resume after the FLNKS convention in early 2023. The minister's strategy was above all to gain time. He needed the appearance of dialogue to try to get a three-fifths majority in the French Parliament to change the French Constitution to end the Nouméa Accord and to deprive it of its constitutional value, then to open by law the electorate to French immigrants and change the institutions. "Peace is worth waiting a few weeks,"

the minister said before leaving for Paris ([Carboni 2022](#)).

The main effect of the Minister's visit was the appointment on 22 December 2022 of Rémi Bastille, secretary general of the high commission in New Caledonia since November 2020, as a "prefect in charge of a public service mission." He will be responsible for managing all issues related to the country's institutional future and for leading any working groups. The minister also set up a first working group of the partners' convention on food sovereignty and land. Although a member of Palika attended, the Caledonian Union was not represented ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2022d](#)).

While politics may have stalled, the economy was no more reassuring. To summarize the situation, in 2022, the country's economy was slowly recovering from the COVID-19 downturn. Cruise passengers were back in Nouméa starting 4 October, but tourism had not yet returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, and the government did not want to put undue pressure on consumption by cutting spending or raising taxes. The specific collegiality in the New Caledonian government in which its members are elected by Congress under a system of proportional representation makes it very difficult to achieve majorities. The result has been an acceleration of deficits that are becoming more widespread and requests for loans to France via the French Development Agency.

In order to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, the French Development

Agency granted a loan of 28.6 billion francs (238 million euros), guaranteed by the French Republic, to the (nonindependentist) Santa government in May 2020. The agreement stipulated that the loan would be used to finance the plan to safeguard the New Caledonian economy during the COVID-19 crisis. On 8 July, a new loan of 20.88 billion francs (175 million euros) at a fixed rate of 3.03 percent was granted to the (pro-independence) Mapou government. This new loan, also guaranteed by the French Republic, was intended to finance the deficit of the health insurance scheme and other social schemes and to boost the New Caledonian economy through investments in electricity production. It also settled the major costs of the COVID-19 crisis with the restoration of requisitioned hotels. These loans came with conditions that were considered political in Congress. They commit the local government to reforms (operational savings, tax increases, health system reform, and participation in a joint monitoring committee) ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia, 2022e](#)). As a consequence, New Caledonia's debt ratio is rocketing and is no longer sustainable. As the high commissioner of the republic, Patrice Faure, declared, "New Caledonia no longer has any borrowing capacity, because ... its debt ratio is excessive. The debt/income ratio which was 35% in 2012 is now 255%" ([La Tribune 2022](#)).

Major reforms are needed, but there is no majority in the New Caledonian Congress. The future deficit of the 2023 budget appears to be

abysmal. It will not be voted on until early 2023 ([Rubichon 2022](#)).

Meanwhile, concerns about losses at New Caledonian nickel plants remain. The event of the year was the docking of a floating power plant at the SLN (Société Le Nickel) wharf in Nouméa that should lower electricity costs. Its arrival was a relief but also a concern. It is temporary for three years. When Christel Bories, CEO of Eramet, SLN's parent company, came to Nouméa in November, SLN announced that it would have no more cash at the beginning of 2023. While SLN has invested massively in Indonesia, could it close one day in Nouméa? The Northern plant changed general managers in April. Australian Neil Meadows confirmed the production target of three thousand tons of nickel per month. However, this objective is still difficult to achieve. The southern plant also changed its leadership. Béatrice Pierre became general manager, replacing Antonin Beurier, who became president ([DNC 2022a](#)).

The strategy of the Southern plant to make intermediate nickel for batteries was initially reassuring. However, Indonesia has also started to produce this product from laterite with more competitive production costs, and concern is growing. In addition, the Southern plant has major technical difficulties that weigh on its operating costs. Its tailings storage pond, known as KO2, is full, and it needs to build a tailings dewatering unit, known as the Lucy project, for 35 billion francs (290 million euros), which would allow it to extend its operation by ten years ([DNC 2022b](#)).

The government did try to create a royalty on the extraction of mining products and an export tax, but there was no agreement in Congress in December, and the texts have been sent back to committee until January.

Apart from nickel, inflation is rising, and wage demands are increasing. An agreement was reached between all of the trade unions and the employers. A 4.17 percent revaluation of low wages will take place on 1 January.

On the social side, there does not seem to be any increased awareness: the year was marked by a record of seventy road deaths. Cases of domestic violence still represent the majority of criminal proceedings. One in five New Caledonian women is a victim of domestic violence, twenty times more than in France. Jean Lèques, the former mayor of Nouméa for twenty-eight years, signatory of the Nouméa Accord, and first president of the Nouméa Accord government, died in June. Déwé Gorodey, a figure in the independence struggle, a woman of letters, and longtime vice president of the government, died in August. Then Louis Kotra Ureigei, founder of the first pro-independence trade union on the island, the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs Kanak et Exploités (Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers) in 1981 and a signatory of the Matignon-Oudinot agreements, died in October.

The positive image of the year, since one is needed, is that of New Caledonian President Mapou meeting US President Joe Biden in Washington, DC, on 29 September. The photo of the two men together

made a big impression on the island. Mapou had been invited to Washington to participate in the first US-Pacific Island Country Summit on 28 and 29 September. Will this recognition of New Caledonia's ability to conduct foreign policy survive the following year (*Présence Kanak 2022*)?

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