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KANAKY NEW CALEDONIA

The year 2020 left Kanaky New Caledonia in a worrying situation, with an economic crisis linked to the pandemic, rising debt, and the country's 2022 budget not being approved and a yes/no referendum that placed two camps in an almost equal face-off. Turnout in the 2020 referendum was overwhelming at 85.69 percent, and out of 180,799 registered voters, 53.26 percent voted no to independence and 46.74 percent voted yes ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2020](#)). Adding to these troubles, as 2021 began, the tension around the sale of Vale's Southern nickel processing plant became increasingly violent. However, the country showed resilience. In March, an agreement was reached on the Southern plant, ending roadblocks and demonstrations across New Caledonia. Despite the COVID-19-linked bereavements, the country's health-care system held up well against the disease, and good progress was made with vaccination. Further, all institutions (Congress, customary Senate, and government) were renewed to the advantage of the pro-independence parties. Nevertheless, a dark shadow hung over the picture: the French State and the nonindependentists demanded a rapid third referendum to remove uncertainties—as early as December 2021 instead of October 2022, as provided for in the Nouméa Agreement—resulting in massive nonparticipation of the

independentists. The Nouméa Accord ended in a huge mess.

In 2021, the multinational company Vale pushed hard to sell its 95 percent share in the Southern hydrometallurgical complex, the remaining 5 percent belonging to the Société de Participation Minière du Sud Calédonien (SPMSC, South New Caledonian Mining Holding Company), a holding company run by the three New Caledonian provinces. Above all, Vale demanded a radical change in strategy: in addition to the export of a less processed product (nickel hydroxide cake), it demanded access to the mineral reserves of Goro saprolites, richer in content than laterites, for export. Vale required this access to the mine to balance its finances and to find a buyer. This would be a very serious blow to the “nickel doctrine” supported by the pro-independence parties, which stipulates that the ore must be transformed rather than sold raw. Political conflict was inevitable. The situation became violent at the end of 2020 and reached its climax in early 2021. Vale drew up a report on the impacts of this violence on 1 February: more than two billion CFP francs in direct destruction onsite and at least five times that in indirect damage (US\$1 = about 107.23 CFP francs). Heavy mining machinery, vehicles, tires, oil stocks, and buildings were set on fire. Forty-eight people came under judicial investigation ([La Première 2020](#)). However, on 4 March, a “political agreement” on the proposed sale of Vale NC was signed between

the Southern Province and the Usine du Sud = Usine Pays (Southern Plant = Country's Plant) collective, which unites customary chiefs, environmental groups, trade unionists, and members of the independence coalition Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), ending six months of violent mobilization.

This agreement was the first of its kind, leading to the emergence of a new mining model involving the rental rather than sale of mining titles to the operator. Vale NC sold its titles to a new structure representing New Caledonian interests, which then leased them to the new operator, Prony Resources (associated with the Swiss multinational company Trafigura). In other words, these mining titles, which are worth more than 50 billion CFP francs, belong to a local company, Sud Nickel, a subsidiary of PromoSud (which is owned by the Southern Province). Prony Resources is governed by four shareholding entities: the SPMSC (30 percent), which represents the three provinces; Fidal fiducie (21 percent), which represents Prony Resources employees and the local population; Trafigura (19 percent); and Compagnie Financière de Prony (30 percent), which represents factory executives and investors (Prony Resources 2022). Together, SPMSC and Fidal fiducie hold a 51 percent share, while Trafigura and Compagnie Financière de Prony (ie, the private sector) hold only a 49 percent share. Vale Canada, owner of 95 percent of Vale Nouvelle-Calédonie, left 500 million euros to Prony Resources, and the French State provided its support with a loan of 200 million euros, as well as a loan guarantee amounting to

180 million euros. A commercial agreement was also signed with Tesla (LNC 2021e).

For the FLNKS (represented by Adolphe Digoué), the basis of the demand was to transform natural capital into social capital. In other words, through this model, the government sought to control the resource and maximize its value by holding a majority of the share capital (LNC 2021a). New Caledonian member of the French National Assembly Philippe Gomès criticized this, noting that the real boss of the business is Compagnie Financière de Prony. With a 30 percent share, it manages everything. No managerial, financial, technical, industrial, or commercial decision can be made without its agreement. Plant employees, the province, and the country are exposed in the event of loss, which, according to Gomès, is dangerous (LNC 2021f).

In June, the Lucy project, a 35 billion CFP franc project to build a dewatering and storage system for operating residues from the Southern plant, was launched (LNC 2016; Caprais 2021). At the end of the year, the company Total Energies and the operator Prony Resources joined forces to carry out a giant photovoltaic project with battery storage capacities. The overall investment is estimated at 20 billion CFP francs (LNC 2021d). The nickel mining industry, despite its economic and environmental risks, continues to drive the New Caledonian economy. Less news has been provided about the Northern factory and the Société Le Nickel. In July 2021, André Dang, the historical leader of the Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (South Pacific Mining Company) group (Northern plant)

handed over his chairmanship to Karl Therby, who has been employed by the group for twenty years.

The year 2021 marked the end of New Caledonia being COVID-19-free. The borders had been closed since March 2020, but after eighteen months of reprieve, and like everywhere else in the world, the country was overtaken by the pandemic. New Caledonia suddenly went from enjoying a certain recklessness in being COVID-19-free to “living with the COVID.” On 8 March 2021, an initial alert of cases in ‘Uvea (Wallis) and Futuna prompted a five-week lockdown, which brought the situation under control. But on 6 September, the first community-acquired cases were discovered, resulting in a new lockdown. The disease led to 281 deaths in 2021, mainly Kanak and other Oceanians, with 12,762 confirmed cases ([Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie 2021](#)).

Vaccination began in January 2021, and by the end of December, 75 percent of the eligible population (64 percent of the total population) had completed the initial two-dose series ([Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie 2021](#)). On 4 September, Congress voted to make vaccination mandatory, and a requirement to have a health pass (following metropolitan France) was introduced on 11 October. The population was strongly divided on these matters. Compulsory vaccination met with reluctance from part of the population, especially Kanak, and the health pass was considered an attack on public freedom. Large multiethnic demonstrations were organized, bringing together several thousand people, which is considerable for Nouméa. Lockdowns and health

protections at the points of entry cost an estimated 40–48 billion CFP francs in 2021, leaving New Caledonia with the difficult task of finding the corresponding revenue. The easy solution was to apply for loans from the French State (Ardoino and Fagnot 2021).

The Santa government (with a Loyalist majority) no longer had the majority in Congress needed to pass the 2021 budget. It decided to allow the deadline of 31 March 2021 to pass, and, as a result, the French high commissioner automatically became responsible for setting the budget on 10 May on the proposal of the New Caledonian branch of the French general accounting office. This was a first in thirty years. The balanced budget was achieved through financial aid from the French State and additional debt taken out by New Caledonia. New Caledonia’s debt has skyrocketed. It reached 146 percent of annual operating revenue at the end of 2020, which is well above prudential standards (90 percent), and was expected to rise further in both 2021 and 2022. Shortly after the budget was set, on 19 May, Patrice Faure was appointed as the next high commissioner by decree of the French Council of Ministers. Most often described as a falcon, Faure was a French soldier who was appointed to the French secret service, and he is renowned for his ability to maintain public order. His appointment was interpreted as a signal of firmness sent by Paris.

In addition to the health and budgetary crises, a political crisis arose. On 2 February 2021, the pro-independence ministers from the Caledonian Union (UC, Union Calédonienne) and Palika (Kanak Liberation Party), the two

major political parties within the FLNKS, resigned from the collegiate cabinet, bringing down the Caledonian government. The point was to show the FLNKS parties' capacity to manage and reform the country in view of the forthcoming referendum, which at the time was expected to be held in October 2022. It took time to form the new government, which was only finalized on 8 July 2021. Led by President Louis Mapou of the Union nationale pour l'indépendance (National Union for Independence) and Palika and Vice President Isabelle Champmoreau, a loyalist, the government includes five FLNKS, one Oceanian Awakening, and five nonindependentist members. Roch Wamytan of UC-FLNKS was reelected president of Congress in the first round, with twenty-nine votes out of fifty-four thanks to the "Oceanian majority" of the FLNKS and Oceanian Awakening. However, the government is not independentist given the even split between FLNKS and nonindependentist members and the support of Oceanian Awakening, which itself is not a pro-independence party. On 26 November, President Mapou made his general policy statement to Congress, setting out his objectives for the next three years until the provincial elections in May 2024. The great action of his government was to be the fight against inequality. He wanted to strengthen the identity of New Caledonia in a country where building a common destiny has not yet been achieved, and he also announced that it was necessary to rethink the relationship with France (LNC 2021b). Further, he shared that he planned to increase tax and social security revenues to loosen budgetary constraints, a strategy criticized by the

government's nonindependence members (LNC 2021c).

Nevertheless, some initiatives were adopted on the common identity of New Caledonia. During his stay in Nouméa at the end of October 2020, French Overseas Minister Sébastien Lecornu, along with Nouméa Mayor Sonia Lagarde, announced that the statue of Governor Olry, who had subdued the Kanak in 1878, would be removed and replaced by a statue of Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Jacques Lafleur shaking hands in 1988. On 15 July 2021, the statue of the governor was removed. On 2 September, the relics (skulls) of the great chief Ataï and his companion Dao, which had been returned by the Musée de l'Homme in France in 2014, were buried at Fonwhary in La Foa. Ataï and Dao had led the resistance to Governor Olry's policy of forcing the Kanak into reservations.

The biggest issue of the year was completing the terms of the Nouméa Accord: "the huge mess" (Alemagna 2021). On 8 April—that is, within the required minimum waiting period of six months after the second referendum—the pro-independence parties asked Overseas Minister Lecornu to organize a third referendum. They did so trusting the words of the former French prime minister at the nineteenth meeting of the Committee of Signatories of the Nouméa Accord held on 10 October 2019. He had ruled out that this third referendum could be organized between mid-2021 and the end of 2022 given the need to clearly distinguish between national elections (those for the French president and the French national assembly between April and June 2022) and

those specific to the future of New Caledonia ([Vie Publique 2019](#)). In response, Lecornu decided not to plan a meeting of the Committee of Signatories and instead changed the format of the discussions by proposing a meeting in Paris with a limited number of interlocutors. The Palika decided not to attend, while the Union Calédonienne went to Paris from 26 May to 1 June. After the meeting, the minister made three announcements. First, he kept the closed, yes/no question, “Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?” without discussing interdependencies. Second, he announced the publication of a document on the consequences of a yes or no vote, which did not achieve consensus ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2021a](#)). Finally, he announced that the referendum would take place in December 2021. On 2 June, the Council of Ministers in Paris set the date for 12 December—one year ahead of the original schedule—as requested by the nonindependence parties.

The FLNKS and other pro-independence parties harshly criticized the French State’s document, which gives the choice between independence with a total break with the past, like French Algeria, or integration into France without examining in any way the possibility of free association, an option proposed by the United Nations for the decolonization process. The document is sometimes caricatural: it announces, without any hesitation, that a yes vote would result in the departure of the 9,500 French civil servants in education, in the armed forces, and in the services of

the high commission and up to seventy thousand departures among the European and Polynesian populations ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2021a](#), 70). The document applies to New Caledonia the rules of the civil code designed for African independences in the 1960s, suggesting that the citizens who would obtain the nationality of the new state would lose French nationality and become foreigners to France without any moderation. Regarding currency, the document underlines the risk linked to the convertibility of the CFP franc with the euro (ie, the risk of “redenomination”), even before the third referendum, which could result in a run on the banks and a drying up of bank liquidity (10). In the document, the French State only considers hypothetical disturbances to public order in a yes scenario, ignoring those of a no scenario (39).

Even though they opposed the 12 December date, the FLNKS initially decided to participate. However, on 20 October, due to the pandemic and the confusion that was setting in with the French presidential campaign, the FLNKS announced that it called for peaceful nonparticipation (without using the term “boycott,” which locally means a sabotage of the polls). They unsuccessfully requested that the French State postpone the date to October 2022. Campaigning in public was difficult because of the pandemic (eg, due to the ban on meetings). The audiovisual campaign was ridiculous since only the nonindependentists chose to express themselves. The televised debates only brought together the supporters of a no vote. The

loyalist campaign was essentially conducted on the theme of fear of independence using the French State's document on the consequences of a yes or no vote. The vote took place on 12 December in remarkable calm. The no won with an outrageous score of 96.5 percent of the vote against 3.5 percent for yes, in a context of a very high abstention of 56.1 percent ([High Commission of the French Republic in New Caledonia 2021b](#)). The call for peaceful nonparticipation by the FLNKS and its allies had been followed. The same day, the president of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, said: "Tonight France is more beautiful, because New Caledonia has decided to stay . . . France is proud to be your homeland" ([Le Point 2021](#)). However, the results were misleading. Despite the success of three consecutive noes, the number of no votes dropped from 81,501 in 2020 to 75,520 in 2021, even less than the 78,361 noes in 2018.

In the absence of legitimacy, this result has led to a dead end. Even though the president of France and the minister of overseas France announced an eighteen-month period (ending June 2023) of stability and of securing the way out of the Nouméa Accord, the FLNKS accepted neither the outcome of the vote nor the minister's schedule. Even before the vote, they had sent a delegation led by Wamytan to the United Nations to contest a decolonization vote without the participation of the colonized people ([Congrès de la Nouvelle Calédonie 2021](#)). At the end of the year, discussions on the institutional future seemed difficult. The pro-independence parties

suspended all discussion until after the French presidential election in April 2022 and the legislative elections in June. Positions are very far apart. The president of the Southern Province and leader of the Loyalists, Sonia Backès, regularly reaffirmed her priorities: giving more autonomy to the provinces, removing New Caledonia from the list of countries to be decolonized, and expanding the electorate to include all French residents ([Boichot 2022](#)). These are all sticking points for the FLNKS, which defends the collegiate government of the country, considers the right to independence to be an acquired international right of the Kanak, and asserts that the opening of the right to vote to all French people who arrived after the Nouméa Accord would constitute a recolonization of New Caledonia. The FLNKS only agreed to discuss the terms of independence in partnership—that is, the status of a freely associated state. New Caledonia has entered a period of political, economic, and institutional uncertainty, the greatest in thirty-four years.

In closing this review, Alban Bensa, more than anyone, should be in our thoughts. He passed away on 10 October 2021 in Bobigny, France, at the age of seventy-three. A specialist on New Caledonia since the 1970s, Bensa carried out considerable anthropological work on the Kanak world. In a letter shared online, Paul Néaoutyine, president of the Northern Province, paid tribute to this "faithful, friendly and fraternal fellow traveler" ([Présidence Province Nord 2021](#); translation mine).

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