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The Significance and Strategic Context of the 2021 New Caledonia Independence Referendum

by Associate Professor Sue Thompson

Concerns that violence will once more re-emerge in New Caledonia has not halted France's determination to hold the third and final independence referendum in the South Pacific territory on December 12 2021, despite calls for a boycott of the vote.

Pro-independence parties have asked for the vote to be postponed until late next year due to a recent spike in Covid-19 cases and deaths, and the restrictions on community gatherings. With 2022 an election year in France, the government in Paris has reportedly ruled this out.

This will be the third referendum that was provided for by the 1998 Noumea Accord. The first two took place in 2018 and 2020 and returned a 'no' vote to independence. The October 2020 ballot was narrowly defeated by a mere 10,000 or so votes.

Ethnic divisions played a significant role in the previous referendums, reflecting a long history of tension in the colony between the indigenous Melanesian Kanak population and immigrant communities from France and other French colonies.

By the 1930s a large European population plus Asian workers had almost outnumbered the indigenous Kanak population. Indeed, the more than 16,000 Europeans in the French colony were the largest European population of any territory in the South Pacific, and 80 per cent of them in 1936 were New Caledonian born. Most of them were descended from French convicts sent there in the 19th century.

At the end of the Second World War, the immediate post-war government in France granted Kanaks French citizenship rights for the first time.

But the government in Paris upgraded the colony in status to an integral territory of metropolitan France – something that did not bode well for future independence.

Electoral reform in 1951 was a turning point for the Kanak community. Increased franchise saw the Kanaks gaining 8,700 voters, and their political power nearly matched that of the Europeans, who had 10,888 voters. They were now poised to take an active part in the political life of the territory. At this stage the Kanak leaders put their support behind a new multiethnic political party, the Union Calédonienne (UC).

For the rest of the 1950s, the UC achieved electoral success and implemented a number of reforms. In the 1953 local elections the party won 15 of 23 seats in the territory's legislature. In 1956 with a change of government in France, universal suffrage was introduced in all of France's overseas territories, boosting the Kanak vote.

However, in the 1960s, the New Caledonian legislative assembly lost much of its autonomous power at the expense of control by metropolitan France. In October 1964 the French Minister for Overseas Territories announced that New Caledonia was an integral part of a Centre d'Experimentation du Pacifique, which was set up to administer France's atomic testing program in the Pacific.

The French Government increased control of New Caledonia's economy including all aspects of the prosperous nickel mining industry. Electoral reform continued to see success for the UC electorally – it won 22 of the 35 legislative assembly seats in the 1967 elections.

But working against the UC's future interests were demographic changes starting in the second half of the 1960s as a result of migration from Algeria and an influx of workers from the French Wallis and Futuna Islands and from French Polynesia.

The Kanak population became a minority. From 51 per cent of the territory's population in 1956 they declined to 46 per cent in 1969. A nickel boom in the early 1970s saw the widening of the wealth gap between Europeans and Kanaks. This contributed to Kanak disenchantment that would go on to be a major cause of violence in the territory in the 1980s.

In the 1977 election, the UC and other Kanak parties lost the majority that they had held in elections since the founding of the UC. This election also revealed how politically polarised the territory had become between the European vote and the Kanak vote.

By the late 1970s, the Kanak political parties supported independence. Opposing such a move were the majority of the European and Polynesian populations, and a minority of Kanak voters.

The 1980s witnessed an escalation of violence in the territory as pro-independent Kanaks ramped up their protests against French rule. This led to violent clashes in the streets between Kanaks and pro-France loyalists.

The government in Paris responded with a round table conference in Paris in July 1983, which recognised the right of the territory to eventual independence through self-determination. This was the first break of the policy that New Caledonia was an integral part of France.

However, in 1983, Kanaks were firmly a minority with 43 per cent of the population.

A change in government in Paris in 1986 saw the election of Jacques Chirac to the presidency who promptly moved to reduce the autonomy of and government financial support for the regions. Thousands of troops were sent to New Caledonia to deter further violence.

The Chirac government also decided to pre-empt the Kanak independence movement by offering in September 1987 a referendum on independence. With no hope of winning, the vote was boycotted by a majority of Kanaks and violence re-emerged in the territory.

Another change in Paris with the election of Francois Mitterrand ushered in a new round of negotiations between political leaders from New Caledonia. This resulted in the 26 June 1988 Matignon Accord that promised an independence referendum. This was then succeeded by the 1998 Noumea Accord that laid provision for the contemporary referendums.

While the provisions of both Accords had managed to halt the violence of the 1980s, the final referendum may well undermine this long period of stability in the South Pacific territory.

Any prolonged tension in New Caledonia could become a thorn in the side of the Macron Government during its election year, as well as potentially undermine its position in the Indo-Pacific.

About the Author

Dr Sue Thompson leads the academic program at the National Security College. She has extensive experience in academia, government, the media and the non-government sector. Her research specialisation examines the history of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia during the Cold War with a focus on foreign and defence policy influences in the post-war evolution of Southeast Asian regionalism. Dr Thompson holds a PhD from the University of London, a Master's degree from the London School of Economics and a Bachelor degree with honours from the Australian National University.

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