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WILL NEW CALEDONIA WIN GENUINE INDEPENDENCE?

Since mid-1984, the French colony of New Caledonia in the South Pacific has featured prominently in international news. From the archipelago itself have come reports of road blocks, mine shutdowns, strikes, election boycotts, violent clashes between settlers and the indigenous people, and between "security" forces and local persons (that have resulted in the deaths of several politically important persons), the dispatch of French troops and administrators, and even a visit by French President Francois Mitterand.

Nor have the newsworthy developments been confined to New Caledonia. The issue has remained prominent in French political debate and election—both for the National Assembly and for the presidency. On the international level, New Caledonia has raised numerous issues—self determination, colonialism, and racism; the nuclear debate; and the East-West rivalry—and has affected relations between several countries (France, Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific Island nations, Libya, Cuba, and the United States).

This high international profile of tiny New Caledonia may seem surprising to most people, particularly Americans. This ISSUE BRIEF therefore seeks to shed some light on the New Caledonia question. It begins with an interview with Robert Van Lierop, an authority on South Pacific politics who represents the Republic of Vanuatu at the United Nations. The interview is followed by two essays sketching the main features of the New Caledonia question: The first traces the evolution and current status of the independence controversy in the colony and in French politics, while the second explores the international implications and ramifications. □

"I don't believe that with independence New Caledonia will be anything other than a sovereign Kanaky state pursuing its own interests and seeking to improve the lives of its citizens."



Robert Van Lierop

What is the significance of the South Pacific region to Black America?

VAN LIEROP: One of the little-appreciated facts about the South Pacific is that many of the countries there are populated by black people. Just as Africa and the Caribbean concern black people, so should the South Pacific. In addition, the region does have important strategic significance.

What are these strategic, geopolitical interests—particularly of the U.S. and of France—in the South Pacific Region?

VAN LIEROP: I think that the strategic interests of the U.S. date back to its involvement in the region prior to World War II. There are other considerations as well: the area's shipping lanes are important; and the area is of increasing economic significance. For some time now France has had a presence in the South Pacific especially in what is now called French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and formerly in Vanuatu. It is no secret that France has for at least 200 years had an interest in maintaining a presence or at least some influence in the region.

The New Caledonia independence struggle has generated much attention. In what ways are the aspirations of the Kanaky people similar to or different from those of other South Pacific Islands?

VAN LIEROP: I believe that they are very similar. Let me put it like this: The French government does not want to believe that the aspirations of the people of the different states in the region are very similar. The Kanaks don't have any designs or ambitions on governing any other people, only themselves. They have made it clear that those settlers who were born and raised in New Caledonia are welcome to become citizens of the new state.

How does the French government's reaction towards the independence movement in New Caledonia compare with that toward Algeria? Do you see any similarities or differences?

VAN LIEROP: I believe there are some similarities in that New Caledonia, like Algeria, does pose a difficult question for the French government. I don't believe that the Mitterand administration wants to perpetuate the image of a colonial government. I think it does have a sincere interest in decolonizing. However, it is somewhat boxed in by public opinion in both France and New Caledonia. Now, one of the great difficulties is that some of the former settlers from Algeria relocated to New Caledonia. This includes some who have hardcore racial prejudice as well as some who were formerly members of the OAS (the secret army of French settlers in Algeria that attempted violently to halt Algeria's march toward independence). The French government is forced to try to control this element and prevent further outbreaks of violence while at the same time moving towards independence. I think it is aware of the seriousness of the problem and is making an effort.

Has the issue of New Caledonian independence been reinscribed on the Decolonization Committee at the United Nations?

VAN LIEROP: The question of New Caledonia has been discussed at the United Nations but it has not yet been formally reinscribed on the list of non-self-governing territories that the Special Committee on Decolonization pays special attention to. There has been considerable talk about doing that and it may occur in the future if sufficient progress is not made toward the decolonization of the territory. I think that the international community - in particular the countries of the South Pacific Forum-is anxious to see the process accelerated because the transition from a colony into an independent state always involves some political instability.

What would be the impact of an independent, socialist Kanaky state in the South Pacific region?

VAN LIEROP: An independent Kanaky state first of all would have control of the mineral wealth of New Caledonia which ranks with Canada and the Soviet Union as the world's leading producers of nickel. Other minerals of lesser quantity are also to be found in New Caledonia. The indigenous people of New Caledonia-the Kanaks-have long felt that their interests are not represented by the rule of settlers who came from France primarily to exploit the mineral resources. The South Pacific right now contains the largest number of non self-governing territories in the world. People who usually are aware of the issues of colonialism in other parts of the world are generally uninformed that most of the world's remaining non-self-governing territories are in the South Pacific. New Caledonia is right now on the cutting edge of the independence movement of the South Pacific and symbolizes the inevitable demise of colonialism globally.

The U.S. ambassador to France, Evan Galbraith, is reported to have commented that an independent New Caledonia might become a new Cuba or Libya. Is there inordinate fear in Western nations that leftist influence might become dominant in the South Pacific?

VAN LIEROP: I have read and heard some of those comments. They generally originate from people who would like to see either a continuation of the *status quo* or perhaps something even worse. I don't believe that with independence New Caledonia will be anything other than a sovereign Kanaky state pursuing its own interests and

seeking to improve the lives of its citizens. International law entitles a people to turn to whatever source it wishes to for friendly relationships. I find it interesting that these alarmists-and that is basically what they are, alarmists-are now so concerned about what they term outside interference in New Caledonia when throughout the period of its colonization they were not similarly concerned about what was clearly outside interference by the colonialists and the settlers.

Given the discouraging experience of other newly independent states, how successful do you think an independent Kanaky state will be in achieving new, more equitable relationships with multi-national corporations?

VAN LIEROP: I don't hold the view that it is impossible to achieve more equitable relationships between a newly independent nation and a multinational. However, you are right; it is extremely difficult to achieve such relationships. And yet there have been examples and instances where restructured relationships are possible. You may wind up still doing business with the same corporation but on a different basis. The situation with respect to Gulf Oil and the People's Republic of Angola is one clear example.

With Zimbabwe in mind do you see any foreign assistance promises made to New Caledonia by the French government being fulfilled?

VAN LIEROP: That is a good question! Yes, foreign aid and assistance promises made to Zimbabwe and Mozambique have not been entirely fulfilled. In the South Pacific too, countries have faced the same problem. I think that is something that an independent New Caledonia is going to have to deal with. Now may be bit premature to speculate whether or not any promises will be kept because so far no promises of aid has been made. But that is definitely something to keep an eye on because we must understand that in many instances of decolonization the former colonial power was able to cut its financial obligation and responsibilities while continuing to reap benefits.

Given the fact that France will hold presidential elections within two years, can one speculate that if New Caledonia doesn't become independent soon President Francois Mitterand will be forced by domestic considerations to take a tougher, anti-independence line in order to win reelection?

VAN LIEROP: That's a question that I cannot answer. Of course we can all make our own private speculations. It's a good question! □

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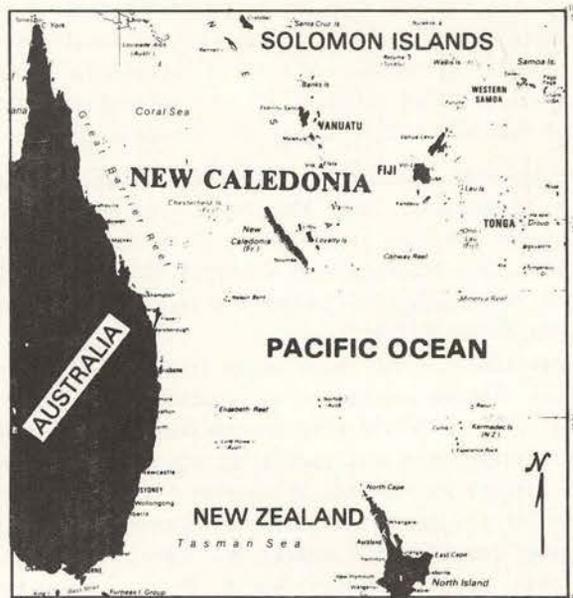
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NEW CALEDONIA'S INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS



The French colony of New Caledonia is an archipelago located in the South Pacific, about 750 miles off Australia's northeast coast, and some 1,000 miles south of Guadalcanal in the U.S.-controlled Solomon Islands. The largest of the islands in Grand Terre on which is located the capital, Noumea. The remaining islands in the archipelago are collectively known as the Liberty Islands. A French colony since 1853 when it was first utilized as a penal colony, New Caledonia today has a population of 140,000 multi-ethnic residents. Its current disproportionate importance to France and prominence in international public discussion is based on several factors: strategic-maintenance of Western presence, dominance, and control in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the denial of these to the Soviet Union; nuclear-French atomic tests in the South Pacific and their impact on France's nuclear capability independent of the US-NATO nuclear umbrella; economic-New Caledonia is the world's third largest producer of nickel; and, ethno-political-a huge proportion of New Caledonia's current population is made up of French citizens with the result that the New Caledonia issue has remained an important political football in France.

The New Caledonia problem has displayed a world wide newsworthiness that is far in excess of what may be expected from the size of the archipelago, its population, and its economy. One visible evidence of this is the nervousness it has generated in the Western alliance. Recently, little-noticed friction has developed in the bilateral relations that France has with the U.S., with Australia, and with New Zealand.

Why has the decolonization of this small archipelago-smaller than Silver Spring, Maryland, and containing a population smaller than one tenth that of Washington D.C.-displayed such prominence beyond France? TransAfrica Forum believes this is because at work in New Caledonia are four factors that have proved very important in twentieth century global politics: *strategic; nuclear; decolonization; and oppressed black people*. The *strategic* factor refers to the on-

going global jockeying for position and influence between the Eastern and Western blocks. The Western strategic objective that is applicable to New Caledonia may be summarized thus: to keep Western presence and influence in the South Pacific high, while ensuring that Eastern (i.e. Soviet) presence and influence remained essentially negligible. In this context, the New Caledonia disturbances have some members of the Western alliance worried that should France mishandle the situation-because of a misguided attempt to extend the privileges enjoyed by a few *colons*-western image in the South Pacific will be tarnished. Soviet influence, by default, would increase. To avert this, two members of the Western alliance-Australia and the U.S.-have made their concerns known to France in sharply contrasting ways.

Recent French-Australian relations have been publicly acrimonious. Australia has severely criticized France for its activities in the South Pacific in general and New Caledonia in particular. The French reaction was swift and angry. No less a person than President Mitterand, in a live television interview, retorted that Australia, with its record of wiping out the entire Aborigine population, is in no position to lecture France on the proper race relations between colonizing and colonized races. It is to be recalled that in addition to decolonization and race relations in New Caledonia, Australia has long been critical of French nuclear tests in the South Pacific. Some French observers have also added that Australia's motives are less than altruistic. They have claimed that Australia wants France out of the South Pacific, so it can be the dominant imperial power in the region.

In contrast to the Australian, American concern and irritation over New Caledonia have not been widely publicized. On the contrary, the Reagan State Department, publicly, has behaved as if (and has claimed that) it has little concern about New Caledonia. It publicly says that it has no information on (and by implication, no interest in) New Caledonia since it is an "internal French matter." However, an important diplomatic incident that appears to reveal the real American feelings on New Caledonia confirms suspicions to the contrary. American Ambassador Evan Galbraith-an outspoken political appointee and a personal friend of President Reagan-has criticized the Mitterand government's handling of New Caledonia. He asserted that New Caledonia was on its way to becoming another Grenada or Cuba. He further claimed that the most successful way to prevent power from falling in the hands of "a small minority" of Kanaks that is friendly with the Soviets, Cubans, and Libyans, was to maintain the *status quo* of colonization. Ambassador Galbraith was roundly criticized by numerous segments of the French body politic. In the aftermath of the incident, the State Department had to do damage assessment and limitation. Today a new American Ambassador is in Paris.

Besides strategic considerations, the second "internationalizing factor" in the New Caledonia situation is *nuclear*. Ever since the formation of the NATO military alliance, every French regime-beginning with those headed by General Charles de Gaulle-has played the role of the maverick, "nonintegrated" member in the 16-nation

alliance. The centerpiece of this French autonomy in defense is its independent nuclear capability. This capability is made up of (a) tactical nuclear forces concentrated in the Army and the Air Force; and (b) the *Force de Frappe* which is made up of intermediate range nuclear missiles based on land, and long range nuclear missiles based on submarines.

Critical to France's nuclear capability is nuclear testing. This, historically, has created foreign relations problems for France because French nuclear tests invariably have been carried out on other peoples' land with consequent endangering of *their* habitat. As early as 1958, Ghana, months after achieving independence strongly protested French atomic tests in the Sahara Desert. It attempted to send a convoy of trucks to the test site and raised the matter in the U.N. Current French nuclear testing is taking place on Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific near Australia, New Zealand, and New Caledonia. Scheduled tests have attracted strong protest from diverse groups including: the nations of the South Pacific Islands; Australia; New Zealand; and the international anti-nuclear Greenpeace Movement. In September 1985, Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke, expressed popular sentiment when he told M. Mitterand that if nuclear tests were as harmless as Mitterand claimed, they should be conducted in metropolitan France.

The recent *Rainbow Warrior* affair renewed the topicality of these issues on the international scene. The incident involved parties with strong opposing attitudes towards nuclear weapons: the anti-nuclear David Lange administration in New Zealand and Greenpeace—both of whom oppose nuclear weapons and testing—and France, which shows near-fanatical attachment to its independent nuclear weapons capability. The incident occurred on 10 July 1985. On that date, the *Rainbow Warrior*, a ship belonging to Greenpeace and on its way to Mururoa Atoll to protest French tests, was mined and sank in Auckland harbor. One Greenpeace member was killed. Later investigations by both New Zealand and French authorities revealed that the attack was carried out by sabotage and intelligence teams of the French secret service, DGSE. The saboteurs had come into New Zealand from New Caledonia. The incident has sent French-New Zealand relations to a new low. Prime Minister Lange has accused the Mitterand government of cover up and has threatened to bring suit against France for violating New Zealand's sovereignty. Also, two French citizens are being tried for murder in New Zealand.

While the *Rainbow Warrior* has been replaced with a sister ship, the *Greenpeace* neither New Zealand, Greenpeace, nor France has changed attitudes towards nuclear testing. Shortly after the sinking on the *Rainbow Warrior*, New Zealand, Australia, and six other South Pacific nations signed a treaty calling for a nuclear free Pacific. Greenpeace has vowed to continue its protests and has dispatched the new ship to the South Pacific. In addition, it has filed suit against the French government. France, on the other hand, has pledged to continue its nuclear tests and President Mitterand has authorized the use of force to ensure that the Mururoa Atoll tests proceed as planned.

In mid-September 1985, France finally admitted that the *Rainbow Warrior* was sunk on direct orders from Paris. However it still refused to disclose who had issued those orders. The Mitterand administration fired both the defense minister and the head of the DGSE, and ordered a second—this time, parliamentary—inquiry into the sinking.

These incidents indicate why the South Pacific nuclear question is sensitive. They also reveal one key French apprehension over an independent New Caledonia: A Kanaky regime in Noumea, even if not pro-Soviet, is almost certain to be vocally anti-nuclear and to criticize French tests in the South Pacific.

Decolonization is the third factor that has won New Caledonia further attention in international affairs. Virtually all Third World governments have found it only natural to understand and express strong support for the Kanaky struggle for self-rule. A number of countries have even gone beyond this to undertake even more concrete acts of support for Kanaky liberation. They include the independent nations of the South Pacific, especially Vanuatu; former French colonies that have themselves experienced the bloody decolonization process—Algeria and Vietnam; and two severe Western critics—Cuba and Libya. Even though the Reagan administration denies it, many observers believe that the fact that some members of the Kanaky leadership have paid visits to Libya and Cuba has marked them in the eyes of the Reagan regime, and partially explains Ambassador Galbraith's outburst in France.

The final phenomenon that has generated international—particularly black American—interest in New Caledonia is *racism*: the image of an oppressed, black people being violently pressured to give up legitimate demands for justice in their own land. New Caledonia thus has some of the perceived characteristics of *apartheid* South Africa. This helps explain the interest it holds for black America which is now immersed in an historic effort to pry American government and business support away from apartheid South Africa.

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Robert Van Lierop

THE NEW CALEDONIA INDEPENDENCE PROBLEM

The basic problem that currently has New Caledonia in turmoil and has catapulted the small colony to the front and op-ed pages of the world's leading newspapers, has to do with colonialism and independence: The indigenous Melanesian people, the Kanaks (who form the largest single group of residents) are demanding independence. France, the colonial power is reluctant to grant independence, ostensibly because the other residents, most of whom are French settlers, fear loss of their privileged positions as well as of Kanak rule and therefore vehemently oppose independence. In the annals of history and colonialism, the demand for independence is not unique. Neither is the French reluctance to give up rule of another people. Nor is the desperate opposition of the privileged settlers. What does make the New Caledonia problem uniquely intractable is the current demographics of the country: While Kanaks are the largest single group, they comprise only 43 percent of the population, while the other ethnically diverse residents comprise a nearly 60 percent majority that appears united in its opposition to independence and to Kanak rule.

The effect of French rule on the Kanaks and on ethnic proportions within the Caledonia population complicates the situation further. There is ample evidence that it was deliberate French colonial policy to change the population balance in New Caledonia. Using social Darwinism as justification, the French took actions that decimated the Kanak population. At the same time, they orchestrated a floodtide of immigrants-mainly anti-independence settlers from Algeria, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Vanuatu. The result is that today Kanaks are a minority in their own land.

Consequently, what has been a common decolonization solution-doing the will of the majority as expressed through the ballot-is proving difficult in New Caledonia. The key stumbling blocks have centered around these questions: who among the colony's residents shall be eligible to vote?; and when should such voting take place?

To an extent greater than any of its predecessors, the administration of French President Francois Mitterand has wrestled with the New Caledonia problem. Some students of history and colonialism find it significant that M. Mitterand-the minister responsible under President Charles de Gaulle when Algeria won back its independence after a particularly bloody decolonization war-is now the president dealing with yet another French colony where French settlers are employing violence and other measures to oppose independence. While campaigning to become president, M. Mitterand stridently supported Kanak independence. His various attempted solutions since coming into office, however, have proved none too successful. M. Mitterand has: visited Noumea; despatched troops to the tiny colony; and offered various proposals for dealing with the problem.

The three most important of these proposals are: the Lemoine Statute, the Pisani Plan, and the Fabius Plan. The first, published in 1984, proposed a transitional period of internal autonomy ending with a referendum in 1989 that would presumably usher in complete independence. The Kanak leadership rejected the Lemoine Plan out of hand. Their key objections were two: absence of electoral reform concerning which residents shall vote, and the unacceptability of the 1989 date since it is likely that a right

wing regime in Paris after the 1988 French presidential elections would cave in to *colon* pressure and renege on this promise.

The Pisani Plan which followed has enjoyed a better reception-at least from the Kanak leadership. Seen by some observers as modelled on the U.S. arrangement for Micronesia, the Pisani Plan offers "...independence with free association with France." France will be in charge of defense and national security. Under it, Noumea the capital, where close to 50 percent of the population lives, would be controlled by whites. The franchise would be limited to residents who have lived in New Caledonia for three or more years. The referendum was scheduled for July 1985. The Kanak reaction appears split: Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the head of Kanak provisional government has offered qualified acceptance while followers of the assassinated Eloi Machoro have rejected it. So have the white leadership. Indeed, some white settlers-and right wing deputies in the French National Assembly-have gone so far as to call President Mitterand a traitor.

Currently the New Caledonia situation is at something of an impasse. At one extreme are the Kanaks; at the other are the settlers; and in the middle is the Mitterand regime which has been accused of sellout by both a coalition of political parties as well as by the Kanak provisional government. The coalition-named the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS)-is made up of several Kanak political organizations: *Union Caledonienne*; *Front Uni de Liberation Kanak*; *Union Progressiste Melanesienne*; *Liberation Kanak Socialiste*; and *Parti Socialiste Caledonien*. These same groups had come together in 1979 to form the Independence Front (FI). Most observers believe that this 1984 change in name from FI to FLNKS signified the adoption of a more militant strategy in reaction to the adoption of the Lemoine Statute. In November 1984 the FLNKS organized a boycott-that was accompanied by violence-of the elections to the Territorial Assembly, and subsequently formed its own provisional government headed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou.

The violence has been noteworthy. While it started far back in the early stages of the Kanak demand for independence, it has escalated since December 1984. During this period, Kanak leaders have charged, "security forces" dispatched by Paris have combined with radical settlers to assassinate indigenous leaders, invade communities, and ransack homes. Among the most prominent leaders killed is Eloi Machoro.

At the time of going to press-September 1985-the Mitterand government had abandoned the Pisani Plan and come up with yet another one, the Fabius Plan, to solve the New Caledonia problem. Its key provisions include:

- the creation of 4 largely autonomous Regional Assemblies in place of the single Territorial Assembly;
- elections to the Assemblies to be held on 29 September 1985;
- universal adult suffrage as the basis of the September elections;
- proportional representation in the Assemblies; and
- a referendum on independence to be held in 1987.

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