

EXPLAINER: Why are Indigenous Kanak People Protesting in New Caledonia?

By Bronte Charles

Some locals fear a new bill imposed from Paris will affect their right to self-determination.

Protests have erupted in New Caledonia in response to changes to local voting rules.

The new laws allow French residents who have lived in the archipelago for more than ten years to vote.

There is a perception they will give France greater control over New Caledonia, and undermine the self-determination of the Indigenous Kanak people.

The protests have led to six deaths and more than 200 arrests. A state of emergency has been declared.

A long fight for independence

The Kanak, the Indigenous Melanesian peoples of what would become New Caledonia, have had a presence on the archipelago for thousands of years.

Their lives there were disrupted by the arrival of James Cook in 1774.

Cook was the one who named the archipelago, because it reminded him of the Scottish highlands (Caledonia being the Latin name for Scotland used by the Roman Empire).

New Caledonia was then colonised by France in 1841 and officially became a French overseas territory in 1946.

Rising occupation and tensions

From 1864, thousands of convicts were shipped to New Caledonia.

As settlers increasingly began to occupy the colonised area, tensions between Paris and Kanak independence movements grew.

New Caledonia is one of the world's largest producers of nickel. The Indigenous people lost control of the natural resource after it was extracted against their will by the French.

There were uprisings that fought for land and resources to be returned to the land's Indigenous people.

In 1998, the Nouméa Accord aimed to address these tensions. The Accord promised to give increased political power to Indigenous people.

The Accord led to three referendums to determine whether New Caledonia would remain part of France or become its own country. In all three, independence from France was rejected.

The outcomes of the referendum meant that France continued to control New Caledonia's military, immigration, foreign policy, economy and elections.

Why are people protesting now?

Under the Nouméa Accord, voting in elections was restricted to people who had resided in New Caledonia prior to 1998.

The measure intended to give greater representation in elections to Indigenous people, who had become a minority.

On May 15, the French lower house passed a bill that allows French residents who have lived in New Caledonia for more than ten years to vote in local elections.

This measure was perceived to contradict France's attempt of 'decolonisation' through the Nouméa Accord.

The current unrest is a build up of tensions where some Indigenous Kanak people feel that the French government is failing to protect their rights, as well as there not being a clear road to decolonisation.

How does the new bill affect Indigenous peoples in New Caledonia?

Today, the Indigenous Kanak people make up 40 per cent of New Caledonia.

There are fears that the decision to allow residents who have lived in New Caledonia for ten years will take self-determination away from the Indigenous Kanak people.

This is because some Indigenous Kanak people have concerns that their votes will be weakened and that their efforts to win independence from France will be undermined.

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