New Caledonia

New Caledonia is gaining more control over its own affairs, due to negotiated accords that promised economic “rebalancing” and evolving autonomy. Paris has continued to delegate more powers of self-government to the country, and 2008 was a year to reflect on the anniversaries of the peacemaking Matignon-Oudinot Accords of 1988 and the Noumea Accord of 1998 (the latter of which has come to constitute a sort of interim constitution). Kanak cultural identity made further advances in local institutions, as did symbols associated with the agreed pursuit of a “common destiny.” But politics in this small, multiethnic society of only a quarter million people continued to be contentious and complex, as seen in the municipal elections in March, ongoing party splintering, and the approach of provincial elections in May 2009, which will elect a Congress empowered to discuss an independence referendum. Despite a sharp drop in nickel prices over the year because of the world economic slump, mining expansion continued, though the Goro metal processing plant project in the South remained controversial. Labor unions were active, but more aggressive police interventions limited their strike actions. France still provided massive financial aid to the territory—more than US$2 billion annually—and planned further France-Pacific summits, while also using New Caledonia’s new associate membership in the Pacific Islands Forum to help spread French influence in the region.

Since 2004, ad hoc cooperation has grown between the centrist loyalists of Avenir Ensemble (AE, Future Together) and the pro-independence parties. Both groups support government intervention in social and economic planning more than the conservatives, who criticized the new trend as “socialism” or “state capitalism.” But AE leader Philippe Gomès, president of the populous Southern Province, called it “economic will” to master strategic resources and labeled the conservative free trade vision “American style ultra-liberalism” (NC, 26 Sept 2008). Because of the inflated cost of living (food prices are twice as high as in France and local housing costs equal those of Paris), the AE-led Congress imposed price and rent controls.
last year, and this year its formula limited rent increases by half, while it continued to build more affordable lodging with French aid (NC, 18 Jan, 5 July 2008). Congress has lowered income taxes on the middle class as well as inheritance taxes; has purchased majority ownership of Enercal (New Caledonia’s primary power producer and supplier); and has actively negotiated the transfer of responsibility for secondary education—which France took over in 1967—back to New Caledonia. It is working on plans to coordinate economic development among the three provinces and to regulate the mining industry, rather than leave the latter to the “anarchic and quasi-wild” style of the past (NC, 13 Aug 2008). The South has started economic activity zones in cooperation with indigenous customary leaders to provide jobs in tribal reserves, and its vast Gouaro Deva ecotourism project near Bourail has combined provincial, private, and customary input in a plan to develop 24,000 acres by the sea (NC, 8 Aug 2008). By June 2008, the centrists were proposing to territorialize ownership of the Société le Nickel (SLN), the country’s largest mining company and employer.

From April through June various commemorations of the peace accords were held, including ceremonies on Ouvea to mourn the violence that had taken place there in 1988. That tragedy was portrayed in a film by Mehdi Lallaoui, which was broadcast on television. In an interview, former Premier Bernard Pons called the Ouvea hostage crisis and the deaths of twenty-five people “one of the saddest moments of my life.” Yet he defended actions taken by French troops against the Kanak militants who had killed four gendarmes and taken hostages to protest against Pons’s proposed regressive statute for New Caledonia (which would have reduced the powers of Kanak-ruled provinces instead of promoting self-rule). Pierre Frogier of the loyalist Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR) objected to what he saw as bias in the made-for-television film and published a letter to “young people” in the territory in which he blamed the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) for the violence. He also argued that there were victims in both camps during the 1980s “events,” not only in Hienghene (where eleven Kanak were ambushed in 1984) and Ouvea (where nineteen Kanak were killed). He said that the famous handshake between loyalist Jacques Lafleur and Kanak independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1988 constituted a moment that young people should emulate by reaching out to each other “without forgetting anything in this past” (NC, 17 May 2008). Colloquia reflecting on the two anniversaries were held in Paris and Noumea and were attended by scholars and participants in both accords, on 26 June, the date the 1988 Matignon Accord was reached. Former Premier Michel Rocard, who had successfully brought Tjibaou and Lafleur together to negotiate, spoke in Paris and Noumea about his reflections, even suggesting that in the post–cold war world of increasing globalization and regionalism, now-autonomous New Caledonia “is already independent.” “The concept no longer has meaning,” he opined, since France has ceded some of its once-sovereign powers to the
European Union (NC, 27 May 2008). Yet French voters rejected the proposed EU constitution in 2005, and many have agitated against further immigration. France also retains UN Security Council veto power and has its own nuclear weapons, hinting that it regards the concept of independence as meaningful.

Two rival visions of plausible outcomes for New Caledonia’s “common destiny”—the goal set out in the Noumea Accord in 1998 and written into the French constitution the following year—have emerged in recent discourses as a possible referendum on independence approaches in 2014. Metropolitan French and local loyalists often speak of federalism, since New Caledonia’s three provinces each have a significant degree of autonomy and the territory itself (as an “overseas collectivity”) is gaining increasing autonomy from France. Legal scholar Jean-Yves Faberon views this “double federalism” (internal and external) as a “guarantee against intolerances” because each province can develop in its own way, while France remains an “impartial arbiter” between the immigrant and indigenous groups. He presented his analysis at the Paris colloquium on the accords organized by Jean-Marc Regnault (TPM, June 2008). The current French high commissioner (Yves Dassonville), the former premier (Rocard), and loyalist political leaders also tout this federal arrangement, sometimes pointing to the troubles in neighboring anglophone Melanesian countries, and the interdependence created by globalization, as sound reasons to drop the “outdated” idea of independence. Frogier even proposed holding the referendum in 2014 to “purge” the independence question and ensure that New Caledonia remains “in” France. Territorial President Harold Martin proposed instead a consensual negotiation before 2014 to remove “doubt” about the future (NC, 5 Jan, 6 June 2008).

Ever since Edgar Pisani’s futile proposal of independence-in-association in 1985, which Tjibaou regarded as a real “opening” in constructive dialogue, the trend among some independence supporters has been to speak of “sovereignty in association with France” as a possible compromise, but usually as a step toward full independence. In June, Victor Tutugoro of the FLNKS said he did not mind Rocard’s blithe comments about the obsolescence of independence, admitting (as Tjibaou had twenty years earlier) that countries are not completely independent today, but that, nevertheless, sovereignty “is the ability to choose one’s own interdependencies.” He said, “The demand for independence stops on the day it succeeds,” implying a maximalist approach, and he added that the FLNKS was prepared to go to the United Nations, the Melanesian Spearhead, and the Non-Aligned Movement for support, as it had done in 1986 to lobby for New Caledonia to be put back on the UN decolonization list (NC, 17 June 2008). Paul Neaoutyne, president of the North, has said, “independence is not negotiable, it’s a right like breathing,” and those who claim that globalization has negated it are engaging in “subterfuge” (Neaoutyne 2006, 94). In response to grandiose statements at the Paris colloquium that New Caledonia had already reached a state of independence (except for the powers
reserved for France, namely military, public order, the courts, money, and foreign affairs), Neaoutyine suggested that the speakers needed to decolonize their minds (Le Goff 2008). Even Senator Simon Louckhote, formerly of the RPCR, has formed his own party, Le Mouvement de la Diversité (LMD), and is studying Pacific cases of “free association,” the arrangement proposed by the United Nations in 1960 as one way to end unequal colonial status (NC, 9 June 2008). In a sense, the distinction between federalism in France and association with France depends on what perspective the speaker is looking from—Europe (at least mentally, in the case of loyalists) or the Pacific. The former privileges the metropole while the latter centers the country in Oceania.

In March 2008, local municipal elections mobilized political rhetoric again, as a kind of rehearsal for the provincial elections in 2009. Over two thousand candidates competed in thirty-three communes. The FLNKS tried to run on a single list supporting the transfer of self-governing measures from France, though in many communes local alliances often cross the lines of territorial parties, and sometimes rival FLNKS members like Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika) and the Union Calédonienne (UC) compete. In the multiethnic capital, Noumea, where most of the country’s population and economic activity is concentrated, the FLNKS joined a list with progressives, since Kanak residents tend to vote in their home districts in the North or Islands. Neaoutyine of Palika emphasized the transfer of powers and the progress of the Koniambo project in building greater economic balance in the country, both of which, he said, were important to “us who want to become independent” (NC, 18 Feb 2008). Among loyalist parties, the AE and RPCR competed mainly in the South, and the AE backed Jean-Pierre Aifa’s campaign to regain Bourail on a platform of local development. Seven lists competed in Noumea, including the new Labor Party created by the pro-independence Union Syndicaliste des Travailleurs Kanak et Exploités (USTKE), whose separatism was lamented by the FLNKS, much as Louckhote took away votes from the RPCR. In the runoff for mayor, Louckhote and Sonia Lagarde of the AE could not agree to ally against the incumbent, with the result that Jean Lèques of the RPCR won a fifth term. Aifa won in Bourail, but the AE lost Dumbea to the RPCR (PIR, 18 March 2008). In the North, Neaoutyine won a close race in Poindimié after a spouse-abuse conviction, but Martin easily won again in Païta in the South. Overall, a relative equilibrium endured, as the AE and RPCR each controlled six communes, though Noumea dwarfed the others in size. Pro-independence lists won the rest, except for some mixed council majorities, and five women (three pro-independence and two loyalist) became mayors (NC, 18 March 2008).

The other political spectacle of the year was growing dissension in the loyalist parties, most notably in the AE, whose Gaullist members had been courted by the RPCR ever since the latter won both the deputy seats (again) in the 2007 legislative elections to the French National Assembly. In addition, the RPCR won 40 percent of the votes in the South in the com-
munal elections and Frogier retains the presidency of Congress. This has prompted Frogier to assert that the RPCR is the premier party in the country, although in reality it has only a fourth of the total seats in Congress. The “government,” or territorial executive chosen by Congress, has its own president, Martin of the AE. Martin, however, belongs to the RPCR’s metropolitan Gaullist ally, French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), whereas several other AE leaders, such as Didier Leroux, belong to former French President Giscard d’Estaing’s party, the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF). Yet Martin continued to uphold the AE’s social democratic policies, in spite of Frogier’s call for more “deregulation” of the economy and a less “socialist” reading of the Noumea Accord (French Socialist premiers had negotiated both peace accords). Martin ridiculed the quest for “national” symbols in New Caledonia, and criticized the transfer of control over secondary education to the territory, despite UMP Premier François Fillon’s affirmation that such transfers of responsibility are “the real motor of the Noumea Accord.” Pierre Bretegnier of the RPCR also attacked interventions in the economy by the provincial governments as “socialist” (NC, 7 Jan, 29 March, 12 Sept 2008).

Tension grew in 2008 between two factions of the AE, that of Martin and Leroux, and that of Gomès. Gomès accused Martin-Leroux of moving too close to the RPCR, while they in turn accused him of cooperating too much with the FLNKS. The political “center” thus appeared to be torn between the country’s two rival poles, though in reality neither polemical representation was entirely accurate, and at least part of the conflict was over personalities. In January, Christine Gamby of Libération Kanak Socialiste (LKS)—who was elected in the South on the AE list in 2004, and in 2007 used a blank ballot tactic to enable the FLNKS to gain an extra seat in the government executive (via proportional representation)—was abruptly fired from the South’s tourism authority. She called it an “ambush” and blamed Gomès, the president of the South, while Leroux and others defended her (NC, 30 Jan 2008). She said the good of the country was more important than egos, and that the true AE was “an up-to-date, contemporary, multiethnic party, in the spirit of our common destiny, a party that promotes tolerance,” unlike the RPCR (NC, 18 July 2008). In June, each AE faction held a separate party congress. Although 12 out of 16 AE delegates in Congress stood by Gomès, Leroux was elected head of the Martin faction. By then, the local branch of the right-wing Front National (FN, the party of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, which is virulently anti-immigrant) had also divided into two factions, one of which formed a new party that aimed to gather dissidents from other parties into a new coalition (NC, 20 June, 21 June 2008).

Amid this loyalist splintering, the AE schism got nastier, as Gomès’s group was refused official permission by Congress President Frogier to sit as a new party and thus lost access to posts in the congressional commissions, to the advantage of the FLNKS. Gomès’s AE also lost its appeals in the administrative court, but it finally
formed a new party regardless, Calédonie Ensemble (Caledonia Together, CE), and maneuvered for more access to posts (NC, 8 Sept, 13 Oct 2008). Situated between the RPCR (13 seats) and the FLNKS/LKS (18 seats), 23 seats were now held by seven splinter groups, including Loueckhote’s LMD (NC, 22 July 2008). The Noumea newspaper said such diversity could be a sign of either a healthy democracy or a cancer in the loyalist camp (NC, 3 July 2008). Gomès claimed his new party would “carry the real country,” as opposed to the Martin-Leroux AE rump, which had “definitively rejoined the RPCR.” He sought to build “a little nation within the French nation” on constructive dialogue, increasing self-government and socioeconomic progress (NC, 13 Oct 2008). Leroux, who belongs to the metropolitan UDF, not Sarkozy’s Gaullist rump, said that his AE was still the same party that had won power in the 2004 provincial elections: “The RPCR wants Caledonia in France, but without the others or above the others. The independentists want very much the others but without France. We want both, because radicalization is a mortal danger” (NC, 9 Oct 2008). While the RPCR and FLNKS both want a referendum on independence in 2014 (but for opposite reasons), both AE groups oppose it and instead support dialogue to reach a consensus before then to avoid another 1980s-style violent conflict (NC, 16 Oct 2008).

Meanwhile, in the 2009 provincial elections, the FLNKS have vowed to repeat the unity shown in the 2007 French legislative elections, when Charles Pidjot of the UC won 45 percent of the ballots in the second district (mostly in the North and Islands provinces). The Congress elected in May 2009 will be chosen by a more restricted electorate of long-term residents. The FLNKS hopes to sweep the North and Islands, and for the first time also win seats in the South, and through allying with progressives gain a majority (NC, 22 Sept 2008; La Voie du FLNKS Sept–Oct 2008). Frogier deployed a boxing analogy when he argued that the AE had never been a real party and had engaged in wasteful government interventions in the economy: “I knocked to the mat the president of Congress [then Martin] and the president of the Government [then Mrs Marie-Noelle Thémereau]. Gaël Yanno [of the RPCR] sent to the ropes the president of the Southern Province [still Gomès].” Accused by other parties of using his position as Congress president to stall the passage of reform laws, Frogier says his goal is to restore the RPCR to power, which it had held for almost twenty years before 2004, “because we must exit quickly from the logic of independentists against non-independentists, and purge the question of independence to build a society composed of a diverse human community. . . . Caledonian society will be more and more mixed [métissée]” (NC, 16 Oct 2008). Diverse perhaps, but assimilated? At the RPCR convention, Frogier had talked dismissively of the Noumea Accord, with its transfer of responsibilities and proposed Kanak “national” symbols, and accused the FLNKS of failing in its administration of the North because of divided leadership and in its duty to seek pardon for loyalist Melanesians who were persecuted in the 1980s (NC, 5 Oct 2008). Victor Tutugoro of the
FLNKS argued that the Kanak uprising at that time was against a dominant system that had negated Kanak identity, even though the Kanak people repeatedly invited non-Kanak to join them in building a country (NC, 9 Oct 2008). The LKS reiterated that inclusive, “Oceanian” view in the Islands Province: “The right of indigenous peoples does not exclude others”; they also noted that the RPCR itself had experienced dissensions (NC, 23 Oct 2008).

In October, pre-provincial election party conventions raised the tone of political rhetoric. The AE of Martin-Leroux, which Gomès accused of being too close to the RPCR, instead took offense at Frogier’s attacks on the AE in October and defended its reformist, state-guided development record. “The RPCR has not changed. . . . the reasons why we created the AE in 2004 still exist,” Leroux noted. “We are now the only credible rampart against the return of the RPCR, against the return of a partisan movement whose aggressiveness divides New Caledonia into two blocs. We don’t have the right to allow the social advances allowed by the AE to be called into question” (NC, 20 Oct 2008). Gomès proposed helping the middle class with zero interest rates on home purchases and touted the success of his development programs in the South. Martin followed suit at the territorial level, offering affordable housing and progress in choosing local identity symbols (NC, 29 Oct, 3 Nov 2008). The FLNKS bid for unity, however, was threatened by the ongoing rivalry between Palika (which has dominated the coalition in recent years, especially in the North) and the UC (the oldest political party in New Caledonia and the former leader of the FLNKS under Tjibaou). The UC saw the world financial crisis as an opportunity to gain local control over the mining industry, since France was retrenching its budget, and to make local citizenship a reality, to protect employment preferences. Pidjot even dismissed the annual accord signers committee meeting (though other UC leaders went in his place, including former UC President Rock Wamytan), to protest what he saw as the changed role of the French State from arbiter to pro-loyalist actor while allowing Kanak and Wallisians to continue their intercommunal struggle at the bottom of the economy. Too many meetings and words, he complained, and not enough action on implementing the Noumea Accord’s lingering promises. In addition, increased economic diversification along with more open discussion within the FLNKS would give greater voice to the frustrated UC constituency, because Palika completely excludes it from power in the North, where UC-backed clans stage customary protests against environmental and other abuses by provincial mining projects (NC, 3 Nov, 1 Dec, 4 Dec 2008). Like the UC, however, Palika reiterated its demand for independence, and the continued transfer of responsibilities from Paris to the local government. It also cited the progress made in the Koniambo project and the Korean processing plant, and advocated a unified electoral campaign in 2009, especially in the South (NC, 7 Nov 2008; Kol 21 Nov 2008), although the smaller parties in the FLNKS seemed to want territorial party unity more (NC, 1 Dec 2008).
The annual meeting of the signers of the Noumea Accord in Paris added more fuel to the verbal fire, though all sides nevertheless took heart from Sarkozy’s pledge of French support for the successful completion of the continuing devolution of powers to the territory, as promised in the accord. Some loyalists had already been disappointed by reductions in French military presence overseas and a budgetary reform that reduces the payment of retirement pensions at “indexed” rates (almost twice the metropolitan level) for those who move overseas, even if they had never resided in New Caledonia before retirement (NC, 11 Nov 2008). In late November, Sarkozy told a delegation of New Caledonian mayors that France would respect both the letter and the spirit of the Noumea Accord, helping to “create the conditions in which the population will be able to freely choose its destiny.” “Everyone has the right to defend his convictions,” he said, “and whatever they are, all Caledonians are faced with the same challenge: lasting success at living together in the same land.” He outlined five goals for the French overseas territories: increase competitiveness, build accordable housing, improve external transportation links, create a professional workforce, and preserve nature while promoting durable growth (NC, 29 Nov 2008). Two weeks later, Sarkozy repeated his attachment to the accord, recognizing the legitimacy in New Caledonia of both the indigenous Kanak and immigrant communities in their dual quest for a common destiny. He said that promised transfers of responsibility would continue, as would dialogue between labor unions and employers (as long as public order was respected); protection of cultural and biological diversity; promotion of education to overcome social imbalances; and mining projects, which are “strategic for our country”—an echo of Gaullist thinking in the 1960s. In their responses, Neaoutyne, Frogier, Martin, and Gomès expressed positive sentiments about Sarkozy’s sincerity but spun his speech to their own liking. “We must accept our past,” said Neaoutyne, president of the North, “because we are in a process of decolonization and emancipation.” Frogier applauded “the return of the State’s authority” as an actor, though he later complained that not much of substance was said except for assurances that secondary education would maintain its quality (NC, 10 Dec, 17 Dec 2008). Martin emphasized the need for consensual decision making, predicting that even the 2009 provincial elections would not produce a ruling majority in Congress (NC, 17 Dec 2008). Palika and the UC resumed sniping at each other afterwards, but Gambey organized an association to pursue funding for youth (NC, 15 Dec 2008). The Labor Party supported independence, with the Kanaky flag as the new national emblem. Its radical anti-colonial stance was applauded by allies from France such as the Greens, Trotskyists, Corsicans, and Larzac peasant leader José Bové, who said the world crisis of free market capitalism was an opportunity to reflect on systemic economic change (NC, 17–18 Nov 2008).

Meanwhile, the Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (SMSF, or South Pacific Mining Company), which is owned by the Northern Province, has a
us$4 billion processing plant project underway at Koniambo, of which it commands 51 percent of the shares in partnership with Swiss Xstrata. Also, the SMSP has just opened an ore processing plant in South Korea, of which it owns 51 percent of the shares in partnership with Posco. The company even offered to help the territory to purchase the sln, which might be accomplished by trading locally owned shares of the sln’s parent company, Eramet (NC, 28 June, 30 June 2008). The SMSP was preparing the site for its Koniambo plant and nearby seaport and housing developments, with the help of tax breaks and financial aid from France (us$260 million), revenues from selling ore to Posco in South Korea, and various bank loans (NC, 1 March 2008). The North also established an environmental protection policy, but has been impeded on several fronts: local firms protested against the hiring of transporters from the South, interclan disputes raged over land claims (NC, 16 May 2008), and the territorial government refused to allow nineteen Filipino “specialists” (cheaper than locals) to work on the site (NC, 20 Aug 2008). To make matters worse, the global financial crisis reduced the price of nickel to us$13,450 a ton in October (NC, 16 Oct 2008; PIR, 23 Oct 2008), Koniambo investor Lehman Brothers failed and a Chinese bank pulled out of the project, as did the construction firm that had hired the Filipinos. But a Swiss bank soon replaced Lehman, and the opening of the Posco processing plant in Korea improved the SMSP’s credibility in Asia (NC, 24 Oct 2008). Xstrata has assured the province that if necessary it will finance the Koniambo project on its own, using dividends temporarily withheld from the province, but the risks of multinational mining deals became ever more apparent (NC, 3 Dec 2008).

In the South, now that UNESCO is protecting the lagoon, construction of the us$3.2 billion, twice-halted Goro nickel processing plant was proceeding, despite the lingering environmental issue of how to dispose of its toxic waste. Separating increasingly limited amounts of ore from massive amounts of excavated soil requires poisonous chemicals. The Goro project director for INCO of Canada (now in fact owned by the Brazilian firm Vale) has insisted that the waste is too expensive to evaporate, because the humid climate is too moist to dry it naturally, and the electrical heaters needed to do it would require too much power and create too much air pollution! (NC, 26 March 2008). The plan, contested in protests and in the courts, was to lay a twenty-one-kilometer heavy plastic pipe, perforated only in the last link, from the plant out to the Havannah Channel in the interim between the whale and cyclone seasons of 2008 to allow production to start in 2009 (NC, 25 Oct 2008). In response, Gomès imposed an extra tax on the pipe of 1 percent of Goro’s total business, and he proposed raising the country’s share of royalties from 10 percent to 20 percent (NC, 16 Feb 2008). As for Raphael Mapou’s association, Rhéébû Nüü, which had battled INCO for six years over environmental, economic, and customary land issues, it won the municipal election in nearby Yaté and erected a Kanak totem pole on a hill above the Goro site to symbolize continuing vigilance (NC, 15 March,
14 July 2008). In September, Rhéebù Nùù signed a “pact for durable development” with Goro Nickel, in which it promised to abide by law and order in return for the creation of a foundation to finance local economic and educational enterprises, a consultative customary environmental oversight committee, and a funded reforestation project. The association claimed, “We have verified that there would be no irreversible pollution,” much to the dismay of ecologists and political sympathizers (NC, 27–29 Sept 2008; kol 7 Oct 2008). Meanwhile, INCO’s permit for the nearby Prony West site (granted almost for free by the former Southern Province regime of Jacques Lafleur) was definitively revoked on appeal in June, after a long legal struggle. Gomès awarded the permit to the SLN, despite its prediction of reduced nickel production in 2009 due to the global economic slump. Gomès had negotiated the possibility of increasing royalties on Goro to 20 percent, and if the SLN builds a processing plant at Prony, the country will own 25 percent of the shares, in line with his goal of increasing local control (NC, 16 June, 26 Sept, 4 Dec 2008).

In the most industrialized country in Oceania, labor unions remain a powerful force in creating pressure for progress (eg, favoring local hiring, a key component of creating a local citizenship). Unfortunately, they also disrupt many people’s lives, as with blockades of ports and roads for few tangible gains. Dramatic union action has often served as a means to attract followers to the leading labor organizations, but High Commissioner Yves Dassonville (like his boss Sarkozy in France) has been severe with militant strikers. The Union Syndicaliste des Ouvriers et Employés de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (USOENC) retained its number one ranking in the May union elections with over 5,000 supporters, as a result of its detailed platform for combating the high cost of living and its preference for “social dialogue” (NC, 5 May 2008). Sylvain Nea’s maverick Confédération Syndicale des Travailleurs de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (CSTNC), often accused of being allied with the RPR against the AE regime, mobilized long, disruptive strikes in 2005 and 2006, but was more subdued this year after several court convictions (NC, 30 Aug 2008). The USTEK, which came in second in the labor union rankings, battled riot police and tear gas and threatened the life of a bus company boss in January (NC, 18 Jan 2008); called a general strike to protest against arrests; demonstrated in May despite the use of tear gas; and called two more general strikes, resulting in twenty court convictions, fines, and prison time for some of its members (NC, 10 Sept 2008). The USTEK-affiliated Labor Party won 6,000 votes in fourteen communes in March, for a total of thirty-three elected city councilors, despite FLNKS complaints of disunity (NC, 31 March 2008). In December, a proposed “law of the country” was set before Congress to grant local citizenship (and thus employment opportunities) only to ten-year residents, unless an employer can prove an individual of shorter residence has irreplaceable qualifications (NC, 10 Dec 2008).

France increased its budgetary aid to all its overseas territories to more than US$5 billion, earmarked especially for social spending and
economic development, with 40 percent of the funds to go to New Caledonia (PIR, 1 Oct 2008; NC, 1 Oct 2008). That news was welcome as the territory and provinces faced budget cuts due to the drop in nickel prices. The resource-poor Islands Province dipped into its reserves to maintain services and wages, but the populous South and Noumea actually increased their budgets for 2009 to continue internal social rebalancing and economic expansion. The RPCR and Leroux-AE opposed the added expenditures, but Gomès’s CE and elements of the FN voted to continue “durable development” (NC, 13 Dec, 20 Dec 2008). A moderate budget passed in Congress due to support from the Leroux-Martin AE, the RPCR, the FN, and Loueckhote; Gomès’s CE and the FLNS voted against it, and the FLNS abstained. Bernard Lepeu of the UC said, “The time of skinny cows has arrived, but the government continues to lower taxes” (NC, 24 Dec 2008). Fully one-fourth of New Caledonians are judged to be in poverty (NC, 11 Dec 2008), prompting Didier Guenant-Janson of the USOENC to suggest that it was time to reform the retail sector; he said, “We import inflation,” which is at a record 3.3 percent, while agriculture is neglected (NC, 5 Dec 2008). But in Paris, an expensive new House of New Caledonia was opened to serve students and others from the “Caillou” (literally, rock, ie, New Caledonia) in France, and to hold cultural events in the name of promoting a common destiny and identity (NC, 24 Nov 2008). French high commissioners and ambassadors in the Pacific also met in Noumea to discuss “regional integration,” and the International Organization of French-Speakers (Francophonie) headed by former President Abdou Diouf of Senegal sought links with the Pacific Islands Forum, now that New Caledonia and French Polynesia are associate members (PIR, 8 Oct, 14 Nov 2008). Gaston Tong Sang, president of French Polynesia, visited Noumea to try to negotiate a project of cooperation. However, local nationalists did not like his idea of moving in Tahitian workers to help with New Caledonia’s mining projects, so not much was accomplished other than photo opportunities with Martin and Frogier (NC, 21–23 Oct 2008).

France clearly desires peace in New Caledonia and wants to change its own image in the region from what it was in the 1980s when nuclear testing in French Polynesia and the suppression of the Kanak independence movement drew antagonism across the Pacific. Sarkozy is reducing the size of the French military, including its presence in New Caledonia, and reforming the costly indexation of civil servant pensions, which has allowed retirees to move to the Pacific territories and receive almost double their money, thus contributing to local inflation (NC, 26 May, 17 Sept 2008). Now that UNESCO has declared them a World Heritage site, France has also vowed to protect New Caledonia’s coral reefs, partly because it wants to patrol the territory’s (and the French Pacific’s) large exclusive economic zone (NC, 28 Jan, 11 Feb 2008). French Overseas Minister Yves Jego wants to make sure that the transfer of self-governing responsibilities from Paris to Noumea...
(provided for by the Noumea Accord and the organic laws of 1999) goes smoothly because, he said, “Our France is not a race, not a land, not a skin color . . . it’s the sharing of a universal quest for liberty, equality and, let’s not forget, of brotherhood. Our France, it’s this nation without parallel which has known how to enlighten the world with its brilliance and to gather into its crucible such different men and women” (NC, 30 May 2008).

At the Pacific Islands Forum in Niue in August, Martin touted the Noumea Accord and progress made toward a common destiny in New Caledonia (NC, 21 Aug 2008). Jego announced that the next France-Pacific summit would be held in Noumea in 2009: “To answer globalization is to integrate the overseas territories into their regional environment.” The French presence was welcomed because of “instability” in Fiji and elsewhere, said the ambassador to Australia (NC, 30 Aug 2008).

In cultural affairs, Kanak identity found additional recognition in the creation of customary police who will replace French gendarmes as state agents in tribal dispute cases, thus transcribing oral palavers into written records (PIR, 21 May 2008; NC, 21 March, 23 Oct, 10 Dec 2008). An academy of Kanak languages has begun to take shape, as agreed in the Noumea Accord, to help promote the teaching of indigenous languages in schools, especially in the multiethnic South where urbanization and language loss pose a greater threat than in the North and Islands (NC, 25 Feb 2008). To deal with rising juvenile delinquency and urban gangs, a new local diploma was created to train youth activity organizers (NC, 11 June 2008), and social policies were being developed to address the increasing number of squatter camps and homelessness in the South, with input from the Customary Senate (NC, 7 Aug, 17 Nov 2008). In December, a Wallisian man was beaten to death by Kanak youths in the Place des Cocotiers in Noumea, while a trial was underway about a fatal shooting in 2002 during the conflict in St Louis between Kanak and Wallisians, after which some of the latter had to be evicted (PIR, 8 Dec 2008; NC, 11 Oct 2008). These events highlight the need for attention to the economic underclass in the South.

In 2003, President Jacques Chirac visited New Caledonia and, on a whim, banned questions about ethnicity from the local population census that year, despite arguments that such data were needed to measure economic disparities and rebalancing. In 2008, an agreement was finally reached to allow the addition of ethnic questions in the 2009 survey (NC, 24 Jan, 9 Oct 2008). The current population is estimated at 245,000. In keeping with the Noumea Accord’s provision for creating new local identity symbols, a hymn and motto—“land of words, land of sharing” (with the term “words” [in French, paroles] connoting oral discourse and commitment)—were chosen in public contests, with bank note designs awaiting a decision on whether to adopt the euro. The more contentious new country name and flag will have to be negotiated by a committee (NC, 27 June 2008). Billy Wapotro, director of the Protestant
Educational Alliance, said in June at the ceremonial Mwâ Kâ totem pole in Noumea, “Rebalancing among people happens through the rebalancing of thinking” (NC, 27 June 2008).

DAVID CHAPPELL

References


La Voie du FLNKS. New coalition bulletin published every two months.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The year 2008 began on a high note with a state visit by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd from 6–7 March, heralding the dawn of a new era between Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Australia. Almost four years of diplomatic friction had begun in 2005 when Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare had to go through three security checks and remove his sandals at the Brisbane airport for security personnel. The Australian government refused to apologize for the incident, calling it a cultural misunderstanding between Papua New Guinea’s “big man” culture and Australian norms and security procedures. This sparked public protests in Port Moresby and prompted the PNG Department of Foreign Affairs to summon Australian Ambassador Michael Potts to explain.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were further strained in 2006 when the international fugitive Julian Moti was spirited out of Port Moresby to Solomon Islands in a clan-destine operation on a PNG Defence Force aircraft. The Australian government retaliated by banning PNG politicians from entering Australia.

Rudd’s trip to the country was the first such visit by an Australian prime minister in eleven years and was well received by Papua New Guinea as a rejuvenation of its relations with Australia. The visit culminated with the two countries signing a forest carbon partnership whereby both countries agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by deforestation and forest degradation.

Following his meeting with Sir Michael, Rudd released the “Port Moresby Declaration,” stressing Australia’s commitment to a “new era of cooperation with island nations of the Pacific.” The twenty-point declaration outlines Australia’s plans related to economic development across the Pacific, as well as their intentions to help Pacific Island nations make progress toward the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals; to pursue the Pacific Partnerships for Development; to work together with other countries to meet the challenges