

Suara Pembaruan. Daily. Jakarta.
Sydney Morning Herald. Daily. Sydney.
TAPOL Bulletin. Monthly. London.
Tifa Irian. Weekly. Jayapura.

NEW CALEDONIA

Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Eloi Machoro, and other Kanak nationalists gave their lives in the 1980s for the cause of independence from France, but as a 1998 referendum on sovereignty nears, the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) is offering a compromise to French loyalists in New Caledonia: independence “in association” with France. The rhetoric of self-determination is still strong, but for the past year the FLNKS has envisioned 1998 as only the beginning of a transitional devolution of authority from Paris. President Bernard Lepeu of the *Union Calédonienne* (UC), the largest party in the FLNKS coalition, views this strategy as the “only way to reconcile the Kanak desire for independence with the desire of loyalists and Paris for French representation in the region” (RAN, 9 Feb 1997). However, an impasse in negotiations over the Kanak acquisition of a key nickel mine was a major stumbling block to preparations for the referendum, which should take place sometime between March and December 1998, according to the Matignon Accords (MacLellan 1997).

Jacques Lafleur, millionaire leader of the loyalist *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR), who signed the Matignon Accords with Tjibaou a decade ago, has been

calling for a “consensual solution” based on a thirty-year pact, rather than leaving the sovereignty issue up to next year’s referendum. His opposition to independence, expressed even in delaying actions in the Territorial Congress on tax bills that would finance projects in the Kanak-controlled Northern Province, has coincided with disagreement between the two leading independence groups, the UC-dominated FLNKS and the *Parti de Libération Kanak* (Palika; MacLellan 1997). Palika split from the FLNKS in the 1995 elections, and although its most prominent leader, Paul Néaoutyine, heads the team bargaining with France over Kanak mineral rights in the Northern Province, Palika prefers to prioritize political discussions over mining issues (RAN, 28 Jan 1997).

In contrast, Lepeu and Rock Wamytan, president of the rump FLNKS, have most actively pursued the creation of a Northern nickel-processing plant, a project that in turn is linked to an exchange of mining sites with the giant *Société le Nickel* (SLN), of which the French state owns a majority of shares. After difficult bargaining in late 1996, ERAMET, the holding company that controls the *Société le Nickel*, had offered to exchange its Koniambo nickel site for the Kanak-owned site at Poum in the Northern Province. But the implementation of that proposal soon stalled, because ERAMET argued that the Koniambo site was worth much more than that at Poum and that a direct exchange without additional compensation would consequently be unfair. The *Société le Nickel*, which operates 80 percent of the active nickel mines in

New Caledonia, claimed that Koniambo contained one-third of all the reserves in the territory and that by 2010 it would provide half the ore processed at its Doniambo plant in Noumea (RAN, 27 Feb 1997).

The avowed goal of the FLNKS is to rectify the “disequilibrium” in resource distribution in the territory. Noumea, the capital, is located in the more populous, multi-ethnic and loyalist South and has the only nickel-processing plant, whereas the Kanak-controlled North is less developed economically and regularly loses unemployed young Kanak migrants to Lafleur’s domain. The Northern Province has attracted potential investment from Falconbridge, a Canadian firm, to help its own *Société Minérale Sud Pacifique* (SMSP) build the proposed new facility and thus deliver five hundred more jobs to local Kanak. Having first asked for a concession at Tiébaghi, just north of Koumac, a port the North is developing to attract people away from Noumea, the FLNKS finally accepted ERAMET’s offer of Koniambo, despite the fact that the site was located in the center-west of Grande Terre and technically in the RPCR-dominated Southern Province.

Didier Leroux, leader of the dissident loyalist party *Une Nouvelle-Calédonie Pour Tous* (UNCT), has voiced support for the SMSP plant but also regards the exchange of Koniambo for Poum as unequal, and has expressed concern about the socialist ideas of the FLNKS. Nicole Waia of Radio Djiido, the radical Kanak station in Noumea, explained that the FLNKS needed the ore vein first, in order to develop the capital necessary for development—

and by implication, possible compensation. Meanwhile, rising demand for stainless steel in Asia caused another Canadian firm, INCO, to propose a mine at Yaté in the South, which it hopes will produce 30,000 tonnes of nickel and cobalt annually by the year 2000 (RAN, 7 Mar 1997, 3 Apr 1997; NC, 9 July 1997).

In February, the FLNKS voted at its congress to insist that the immediate exchange of the two mining sites be a precondition for further political talks about 1998. This led the French minister of industry to intervene directly to speed up the process and make sure the Northern plant “sees the light of day.” The French state even threatened to abrogate the *Société le Nickel*’s title to Koniambo, despite its twenty-two-year mining operation at that site. ERAMET then threatened to undertake legal proceedings in its own defense and criticized Falconbridge for conducting no feasibility studies on the proposed SMSP project. To step up the pressure on Paris, the FLNKS staged a three-week blockade of the Koniambo site in March. As Mayor Marcel Nedia of Koné said, “Independence can’t be conceived of without mastering the economy of our country.” But Palika and the UC’s partner in the rump FLNKS, the *Union Progressiste Mélanésienne* (UPM), did not participate in the anti-SLN protests (RAN, 24–25 Feb 1997, 19–20 Mar 1997; NC, 31 May 1997). In April, the *Union Syndicale des Ouvriers et des Employés de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (USOENC) called for a general labor strike, as an ultimatum to France to facilitate the Koniambo transfer. Two thousand protesters met outside the French High

Commission in Noumea and marched to a rally at the congress hall, and the UC followed up with its own demonstration the next day. All mineral exports from New Caledonia were blocked for two weeks, and protests spread across the mining sites in the North until ERAMET finally agreed to appoint a new negotiator (RAN, 5-21 Apr 1997).

France held parliamentary elections in May and June that resulted in a Socialist victory. Both the FLNKS and Palika had refused to offer candidates, arguing that the main issue in the voting would be European Union membership. Palika claimed that participation would imply integration into a system that condoned colonialism in Kanaky. Maverick nationalist Nidoish Naisseline of the Loyalty Islands-based party *Libération Kanak Socialiste* (LKS) surprised many by urging his followers to vote RPCR in the national elections, "in the spirit of dialogue" (RAN, 5 May 1997). Aided by the FLNKS boycott, RPCR candidate Pierre Frogier was elected by 61 percent of the votes cast in his district and joined Lafleur (elected for the seventh time) as a delegate to Paris. His chief opponent, Philippe Pentecost, was hailed by some as a "third force" locally. He won in Northern towns like Poindimié by attracting support from dissident loyalist Robert Frouin, pro-sovereignty labor unions, and ironically, elements of Palika (NC, 2 June 1997, 23 July 1997; NH, 5-11 June 1997).

In mid-June, Wamytan led a delegation to Paris to confer with new Premier Lionel Jospin and new Minister for Overseas Territories Jean-Jack Queyranne, explaining that the mining

issue was jeopardizing the Matignon Accords signed in 1988 by Socialist Premier Michel Rocard. Wamytan liked the fact that the Socialist platform in 1997 mentioned support for a new statute for New Caledonia, "permitting its accession to sovereignty, according to the rhythm and methods fixed by the local [Matignon] partners." But the latter wording, he said, implied that the FLNKS had to "remain vigilant" in order to secure its goals (NC, 3 June 1997; RAN, 17-20 June 1997).

While in Paris, Wamytan pushed again for the Northern plant as a means of economic emancipation to accompany political decolonization, and he apparently found a sympathetic ear in Alain Christnacht, a counselor to the premier who had been French high commissioner to New Caledonia from 1991 to 1994. However, resolution of the mining issue continued to elude the FLNKS when hardliner Yves Rambaud was reelected general manager of ERAMET and set about mending relations with Paris while protecting SLN interests in New Caledonia. Wamytan felt betrayed by Jospin's lack of movement on Koniambo, and by October the FLNKS and USOENC resorted to new blockades, first of the Kopeto mine to protest Rambaud's visit there, and then of all five SLN sites for a month. The FLNKS also blockaded transportation routes in the North for a week, until in early November the new French cabinet in Paris agreed to support the Northern plant more forcefully (NC, 19-20 June 1997, 12 Sep 1997; RAN, 15-23 Oct 1997, 4 Nov 1997).

Another issue was immigration. An

estimated ten thousand people have migrated to New Caledonia since the Matignon Accords, threatening the employment of local residents, especially Kanak, as well as raising questions of voting rights. In the May-June elections, Louis Kotra Uregei, head of the powerful pro-independence, leftist labor federation, *Union Syndicaliste des Travailleurs Kanak et Exploités* (USTKE), had supported Leroux and Pentecost in order to try to stop the RPCR, which he called the party of immigration. The illegal arrival in November of 110 Chinese boat people led to demands for their repatriation from Palika, a "Stop Immigration" collective, and USTKE. Despite counter-protests by humanitarian groups, the government interned the Chinese and agreed to send them home. An exception to this exclusionist attitude was the continued migration of Polynesians from Wallis and Futuna, some of whom live in squatter camps around Noumea. The FLNKS made overtures to change its charter and accept its political ally in Congress, the Wallisian-dominated *Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien* (RDO), led by Aloisio Sako, as a full member of the nationalist front. In return, the RDO reaffirmed its support of the "independence in association" goal of the FLNKS (RAN, 24 Feb 1997, 28 Apr 1997; Maclellan 1997; NH, 5-11 June 1997). Meanwhile, three hundred members of La Nouvelle, an organization of the descendants of convicts transported to New Caledonia, held a ceremony in December to commemorate the centennial of the last prison ship's

arrival, in order "to lay bare taboos about the colonial period" (RAN, 14 Dec 1997).

The Pacific Forum, the Melanesian Spearhead, and the United Nations have all voiced support for an "act of self-determination" in New Caledonia, in compliance with the Matignon Accords of 1988. Yet many Caldoches (local-born Europeans) hope there will not be a referendum in 1998, because they worry about the precedent of the violent 1980s. Moreover, they ask what makes a Canadian multinational corporation (Falconbridge) a better investor in local mining than the *Société Le Nickel* (Domergue-Schmidt 1997). Cartoons in the weekly newspaper *Les Nouvelles Hebdo* ridicule Kanak nationalists and pro-independence unionists (NH, 19-25 June 1997, 31 July-6 Aug 1997), and despite the rise of the RDO, most Polynesian and Asian immigrants also feel that their security lies in continued French hegemony. In October, Queyranne told Pacific journalists in Canberra that, based on his recent visit to New Caledonia, he was optimistic about a peaceful resolution of the territory's future status, because it was "stable"—even as the FLNKS was blockading the territory's mines. He envisioned "a greater autonomy" for New Caledonia within the Republic and also announced that French financial aid to the South Pacific Commission would increase by 3 percent, a reminder that money talks in Oceania. Meanwhile, Robert Garrigos of the French University of the Pacific told the press that the mission of the Noumea and Pape'ete campuses was to

spread French civilization across the region and thereby “create a sort of balance with the anglophone presence” (RAN, 21 Oct 1997; NC, 2–8 Sep 1997).

While repeatedly professing unity with the UC-led FLNKS, Palika and the UPM continued to criticize Wamytan’s handling of the Northern plant issue, advocating a more accommodating approach. In an effort to overcome the Koniambo impasse, Jospin sent Philippe Essig to New Caledonia in late August to mediate between political opponents and mining interests. By early November, Essig produced a report that pleased the FLNKS: the French state would facilitate an immediate “ad hoc” transfer of Koniambo to the *Société Minérale Sud Pacifique* in exchange for the Poupou site, whose price had already been agreed on when the company purchased it from the *Société le Nickel* in 1995. A team of “internationally recognized experts” would, however, assess the value of the Koniambo vein in order to determine the financial “balance due” to the *Société le Nickel* beyond the worth of Poupou. In addition, SMSP-Falconbridge would have a deadline (2005) by which to conduct the feasibility studies needed to effect the construction of the Northern plant. Only if they then decided to go ahead with the project would the formal title transfers take place (NC, 5 Nov 1997).

With this apparent resolution of the mining issue, the political question revived. Earlier in the year, when Waia pressed Wamytan about whether 1998 would simply recognize a negotiated agreement instead of being a real vote

on sovereignty, he replied, “It’s not that we have dropped the [latter idea], but let’s say we have taken another route . . . it will be more a referendum to ratify a solution we have found together” (RAN, 6 Feb 1997). Yet toward year’s end, Raphael Mapou of Palika expressed concern that the mining impasse was retarding political discussions so badly that time might run out for a consensual agreement in 1998. As the Matignon decade entered “the red zone,” as he called it, it could become necessary to prepare for a genuine vote on independence, perhaps under United Nations supervision. “It serves no purpose to continue to speak of a negotiated solution when nobody wants to sit around the table” (NC, 27 Sep 1997; Maclellan 1997). Lafleur, like Palika, has been calling for political dialogue all along, but the FLNKS clearly wanted to force economic concessions as part of the decolonization process. Meanwhile, local Kanak mayors and customary chiefs have often opposed the expansion of mining, warning against environmental pollution and loss of communal lands. Despite the FLNKS victory in the North, Kanaky remains very much a work in progress, and 1998 is unlikely to be dull.

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By any measure this was an extraordinary year in Papua New Guinea, where dramatic and often tragic events have become commonplace in recent times. The government's latest attempt to force a military solution to the long-standing Bougainville secessionist crisis, this time with the help of foreign mercenaries, backfired badly. It precipitated a constitutional crisis when the Defence Force commander abruptly withdrew his support for the plan and elements of the military moved to expel the mercenaries. Veteran politician Sir Julius Chan was obliged to stand down as prime minister, in the face of overwhelming public support for the defiant soldiers, and lost his parliamentary seat in the general election later in the year. Unfortunately, his successor, Bill Skate, did little to restore public faith in the badly discredited political system. He rose to power by forming a coalition with the remnants of the Chan government, people whose integrity he had vehemently attacked in the run up to the general election. Later he was exposed on secretly recorded videotapes claiming, among other things, to be the "godfather" of Port Moresby's notorious *raskol* gangs. The mercenary debacle did, however, provide a

welcome boost for the peace process in Bougainville, and by the end of the year most of the elements of the so-called Burnham Declaration hammered out in New Zealand in July were in place and yielding positive results. Meanwhile, another disaster, this one natural in origin, was gathering momentum throughout the country as the worst drought in more than a century caused extensive crop failures, putting many rural Papua New Guineans at risk.

Government officials and military leaders have long been frustrated by their inability to combat the guerrilla tactics of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and acutely conscious of their dependence on Australia for military training and equipment. In the face of Canberra's increasing reluctance to support the military effort on Bougainville, Defence Minister Mathias Ijape began to seek private sources of military hardware in early 1996. A foreign business associate, with whom he had worked on an earlier plan to establish an elite police unit, put him in touch with Tim Spicer, a London-based director of a military consultancy company soon to be called Sandline International. In April 1996, Ijape, Secretary for Defence James Melegepa, and Defence Force Commander Jerry Singirok met in Cairns with Spicer and another London-based consultant to discuss Papua New Guinea's military needs. Spicer then prepared a proposal called Project Contravene, which was presented to Singirok and Ijape later the same month. In December, after Deputy Prime Minister Chris Haiveta became interested in the idea, Spicer visited Papua New Guinea for further