

Kanaky

Anything is still possible

The “no” victory in the referendum on the independence of New Caledonia is not the final word. With 56% of “no” votes and 44% “yes”, the result is far closer than the polls led us to believe, and the Matignon Agreements offer two new opportunities to continue to question the election results of Sunday, 4 November 2018.

This Sunday the Kanak people won the right to self-determination. First they defied the predictions of a low turnout, in particular on the part of young Kanaks, who had been said by the polls to be discouraged by the forecast defeat. In the event the opposite happened, with a turnout of more than 80%. In an electorate in which Kanaks are a minority, “no” carried the day, but with strong electoral backing and encouragement from the polls, “no” voters had hoped for as much as 70% of the vote. Such a result would have brought the debate to its conclusion and put an end to the Kanak dream born thirty years ago. But the mobilisation of the Kanak electorate has kept hope alive, limiting the “no” victory.

This is because the Matignon Agreements accepted two concessions to the demands of Kanak leaders. The first was to “freeze” the conditions of the 1988 electorate, registering no new arrivals who were not New Caledonian by origin or subsequently born on the islands. The second is that there remains an option to hold two further referendums before 2022, if they are requested by 18 of the 54 elected representatives of the Territorial Authority, corresponding to the irreducible representation of the pro-independence forces, and also to those who are most opposed in the event of a win for “yes”. The mechanism is simple: if the first round had resulted in a win for “yes”, there is no doubt that the anti-independence camp would have demanded a new vote. And if this second vote goes the other way, a third referendum will be called to decide the matter definitively.

What will the supporters of independence do? There would be no appeal against a second loss. So careful thought is required about the window of opportunity for calling a new vote. Some of the most radical independence supporters abstained, believing that the vote was a sham. They were mistaken, and this time they must get fully involved to mobilise all Kanak electors. Secondly, the much closer than expected result suggests that non-Kanak peoples - Wallisian, Métis communities or New Caledonians of European descent - have not all closed the door to independence in their islands. This movement must be analysed, and strategies devised to increase its scale. Because the future of Kanaky, in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, cannot be limited to the horizon of a mainland France on the opposite side of the world, 22,000 kilometres away at the most distant point possible on the globe.

In the run-up to the referendum, there was a disagreement about the wording of the question between the Kanaks of FLNKS, the party inherited from Jean Marie Djibaou, which suggested “Do you want New Caledonia to accede to full sovereignty” and the Government’s preferred formula, which added “and become independent”. This debate speaks volumes. Explicitly adding “and become independent” to the question was a clear attempt at fear-mongering by Edouard Philippe, with the hope of obtaining a “no” win without right of appeal. He failed. In trying to reject this addition, the Kanaks opened the door to a possible partial independence, that is to say the pursuit of a relationship of structural cooperation between France and Kanaky, within a framework negotiated as equals between a sovereign territory and a distant power.

The referendum result puts this negotiation back on the table under the auspices of the UN, which has categorised New Caledonia as a territory to be decolonised. The Macron government will have to remove its blinkers and accept a genuine dialogue. We in Corsica know that it's not a given when confronted by a power that is closed to institutional change and to the recognition of the rights of historic peoples in the Constitution.

On Sunday evening in Nouméa, the streets were filled with Kanak flags. For Kanaky, this is not end of the story.

François Alfonsi, EFA President