

Bougainville autonomy deal remains fragile

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The future of the autonomy package signed between the Papua New Guinea government and various factions from the island of Bougainville remains uncertain despite the orchestrated festivities that accompanied the signing ceremony in the Bougainville town of Arawa on August 30.

About 10,000 people, many in traditional costumes, attended the celebrations as the PNG Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta initialled the agreement with leaders of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and the government-backed Bougainville Resistance Force (BRF). Morauta declared the day to be “special and significant” for the people of Bougainville and PNG, but his government has not yet put the deal to the PNG parliament, where it requires a three-quarters majority.

Between 1988 and 1997, Bougainville island—1,200 km east of the PNG capital Port Moresby—was ravaged by bitter fighting as the PNG army and the BRF, armed and supplied by Australia, attempted to crush the secessionist BRA. About 20,000 of the island’s 175,000 people were killed by the fighting and a four-year army blockade of food, medical and fuel supplies. The conflict was sparked by landowner grievances over the giant Australian-owned Panguna copper mine—one of the largest in the world. BRA fighters shut down the mine and dissident BRA members continue to control the area around it.

Under the peace agreement, which has taken four years to finalise, autonomy will be phased in over the next five years and an independence referendum will be conducted in 10 to 15 years’ time. Bougainville will establish its own police force, judiciary, taxation regime, commercial bank and courts. The PNG government will retain control over Defence and Foreign Affairs, although its military will largely be excluded from the island.

Morauta has admitted that the national parliament

may not ratify the necessary changes to the PNG constitution. “Every informed citizen knows just how hard it can be to be sure of the numbers on any particular day,” he said. Morauta’s party, the Peoples Democratic Movement, claims to have an overwhelming majority in parliament, but his government faces deep resistance to its IMF-dictated program of privatisation, economic restructuring and budget slashing.

Parliamentary opposition figures, including former prime minister Michael Somare have canvassed the defeat of the Bougainville deal. “I have my doubts about the legislation getting through,” Somare said recently. North Waghi MP Fabian Pok said no members had debated the autonomy package and raised concerns that it would set a precedent for other PNG provinces.

Unless the constitutional amendments are passed, the former warring Bougainville factions may pull out of the proposed weapons disposal program, which is being supervised by an Australian-led monitoring force.

The tenuousness of the agreement was highlighted the night before the signing, when members of the Me’ekamui Force erected a roadblock to stop people travelling to the ceremony. Me’ekamui, led by former BRA commander Francis Ona, controls nearly one-fifth of the island. It has refused to participate publicly in talks with the PNG government, despite pleas by the government and other Bougainville factions.

Bougainville Affairs Minister Moi Avei could only express the hope that Ona would not disrupt the agreement. “While the national government would obviously prefer that Francis Ona and his closest supporters become full participants in the peace process,” he said, “we recognise they have, in practice, respected previous agreements, and look to them to continue doing so now”.

Even if parliament passes the amendments, the

situation will remain unstable. BRA leaders have declared that they want a referendum on independence within three to five years, rather than 10 to 15 years. BRA defence chief Ishmael Toroama signed the document in Arawa, but maintained that the BRA had not agreed to the longer period.

The PNG government is desperate to secure the agreement in order to convince international investors of its ability to overcome the country's instability. Standard and Poors, the international credit rating agency, recently downgraded PNG because of dwindling mining investment. Mining and oil production account for 60 percent of export earnings and 20 percent of government revenue.

Given the volatility throughout the Asia-Pacific region—from the secessionist and communal conflicts across Indonesia to the coups in the Solomon Islands and Fiji—the government in Australia, PNG's former colonial ruler, is equally anxious to end the Bougainville fighting. Since abandoning hopes in a PNG military victory and pushing for a ceasefire in 1997, the Australian government has sponsored no less than 26 different sets of talks between the Bougainville parties.

The Bougainville pact could have other consequences, however. Two other PNG districts have called for similar autonomy deals, raising the spectre of PNG fragmenting along regional and tribal lines. East New Britain Governor Leo Dion has criticised the lack of funds for development in his province, while chiefs on the island of Buka, part of Bougainville province, have demanded a separate budget.

On Bougainville itself, the agreement will not improve living standards. The only beneficiaries will be the different faction leaders who hope to use villagers as cheap labour. At the signing ceremony, Bougainville Provincial Governor John Momis spoke of a "new social, economic order," but admitted that there were no funds for such basic requirements as education, health and road building.



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