

Papua New Guinea: Bougainville election sets stage for renewed tensions

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11 July 2005

Elections for the Autonomous Government of Bougainville were held in May as part of a peace deal that ended years of fighting in the Papua New Guinean (PNG) province between government forces and separatist rebels. Far from easing tensions, however, the poll has only heightened rivalry between competing factions on the islands.

The chief candidates for the presidency were John Momis, a longstanding PNG parliamentarian, and Joseph Kabui, an ex-commander of the separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). Kabui easily defeated Momis by 37,928 votes to 22,970 in results announced on June 4. Kabui's People's Congress Party won 14 of the 40 seats in parliament and has formed a grand coalition with independents and other factions.

The Bougainville government was sworn in on June 15, amid self-congratulations by the Australian government and the United Nations (UN), both which pushed for a settlement to the bitter conflict. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared that it was "an historic day" for Australia and praised the role of some 3,800 Australian peace monitors in supervising the protracted process.

Australia, PNG's former colonial ruler, has been involved in the conflict from the outset and bears heavy responsibility for the resulting death and destruction. Fighting erupted in 1989 after a group of landowners led by Francis Ona failed to make any headway in their calls for increased royalties from the giant Panguna copper mine operated by the Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto group. Their demands broadened to Bougainville independence after the PNG government, backed by Canberra, reacted with savage repression.

As far as the Australian government was concerned, it was necessary to decisively defeat Ona and the BRA in order to prevent similar struggles from threatening

other lucrative mining projects. At least 10,000 people, out of a total population of 180,000, died on Bougainville in the course of the bloody war or as a result of the economic blockade imposed on the islands. Only after the PNG military proved unable to defeat the BRA did Canberra adopt a new tack, pushing for a negotiated settlement with the BRA in the hope of ultimately reopening the Panguna mine.

The Bougainville conflict not only meant a loss of revenue for the mine owners but the end of royalties to the PNG government. In 1997, amid deepening economic difficulties, the PNG government of Prime Minister Julius Chan signed a deal, behind the backs of Canberra, with a mercenary outfit, Sandline International, to regain control of Bougainville in return for a share of the mine profits. After details were leaked in the Australian press, the Howard government sided with efforts to oust Chan and install a government amenable to talks with the BRA.

Following prolonged negotiations, the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) was finally signed in 2001. Once the UN secured the weapons of the warring parties, two unelected bodies—the official Bougainville Interim Provincial Government and the Bougainville Peoples Congress—established a commission to draft a constitution to go before a "representative" Constituent Assembly. There was no provision for any vote by the Bougainville people until after the constitution was adopted.

The deal provided for greater legal autonomy for Bougainville, which was given effect by the recent elections. The new local administration has the power to establish a police force, judiciary, taxation system, commercial bank and courts. Port Moresby retains control over defence and foreign affairs, although the PNG military will largely be excluded from the island.

A referendum on full independence is due to be held within 10 to 15 years.

While the Howard government and the UN were patting themselves on the back, the peace deal and the elections have resolved none of the problems facing Bougainvilleans. The economy is in desperate straits and few of the social needs of the population have been addressed since fighting ended in 1998.

Kabui, who represents a small privileged elite on Bougainville, is desperate to attract investment. “Definitely funding is going to be our No. 1 priority. To restore our economy, we will also have to look towards foreign investor partnerships as a matter of priority,” he said recently. Both agriculture and the province’s small manufacturing industries were decimated during the civil war.

The key economic issue remains the fate of closed Panguna mine. Francis Ona refused to take part in peace talks or the elections. His faction still controls nearly a fifth of the island, including the area around the mine. One of the first actions of the Kabui government was to agree unanimously to an immediate review of the existing Bougainville copper mining agreement with the hope of lifting the current moratorium on exploration on the island.

Both Kabui and PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare have repeatedly urged Ona to join the political process. “I once again call on Francis Ona and his supporters around Panguna to respect the wishes of the Bougainville people and to work within the mandate of the United Nations for the greater good of Bougainville and Papua New Guinea,” Somare said on June 15. Kabui went further, calling Ona a hero and offering him a place in the government.

Ona, however, has refused to join the government and has opposed plans to reopen the mine. He has even ruled out Kabui’s proposal to allow local landowners to collect gold from the mine’s tailings. Ona told the *Post Courier* in early July that he was already selling gold extracted from the tailings to finance his plans to proclaim his own republic of Me’ekamui.

“Kabui and his government must find other means of earning money and not try to use this mine to get loans from the World Bank. If you don’t have the money, then close the government and let me run it. Me’ekamui has all the funding available and ready,” Ona declared.

Ona has declared that the region under his control is “independent Bougainville”. He told the *Post Courier* that he was making preparations to set up his own parliament. The newspaper reported that 63 policemen graduated from a weeklong course in the no-go region and were issued with uniforms and boots on their way to work in the local villages.

Ona is not the only challenge faced by the autonomous government. Kabui’s presidential rival, Momis, has indicated that he will take legal action over the election result, claiming widespread corruption and intimidation of voters. Prior to polling it was feared that a third of eligible voters might miss out because of inaccuracies in the electoral roll. Many people normally eligible to vote but residing outside Bougainville were turned away as they were not registered.

The establishment of an autonomous government on Bougainville has raised deep concerns in the PNG ruling elite. According to former deputy prime minister Akoka Doi: “Granting autonomy to Bougainville as a one-off case to self-govern after March 23 ... is nothing more than recipe for accelerated disintegration of national unity. There will be chaos. The nation’s economic and political stability will deteriorate wholesale and thereby creating a situation that will deter all forms of foreign investment and a possible exodus of business from PNG.”

Previously, the governors of Madang and New Britain have made calls for greater provincial autonomy along the lines of Bougainville. Morobe Governor Luther Wenge supports full independence for Bougainville and insists that his province must be the next autonomous region. Wenge is looking to implement a version of Kabui’s plans to augment the province’s finances by encouraging foreign investment.

The formation of Kabui’s government has simply set the stage for renewed political, and possibly armed, conflict on Bougainville and throughout PNG as rival sections of the ruling elite vie to gain a few crumbs from the profits being made by foreign investors in the country.



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