

Papua New Guinea: Voting under way in Bougainville independence referendum

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A referendum, 20 years in the making, is underway to decide whether the small island of Bougainville in the south west Pacific will seek full independence from Papua New Guinea (PNG). The result of the two-week poll will be announced after voting ends on December 7.

Bougainville is a semi-autonomous, resource-rich region of PNG with its own administration, but dependent on the national government for most of its income. The referendum was part of a ceasefire agreement that ended a brutal decade-long civil war in 1998, which was followed by the 2001 signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement.

The PNG parliament voted in 2002 to amend the constitution to allow the referendum. It was the culmination of a process initiated in 1997 by Australia, the former colonial power, after the PNG military proved incapable of defeating an insurgency led by the self-styled Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).

More than 20 separate conferences between the PNG government, its supporters and various factions of the Bougainville independence movement were needed to secure the agreement. The provincial government gradually assumed various powers over five years, establishing a police force, judiciary, taxation system, commercial bank and courts.

It is widely expected that most of 206,000 registered voters will cast ballots in favour of independence. However, the result remains subject to ratification by the PNG parliament. Under former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, it appeared PNG would resist full independence. The new government of James Marape has expressed a preference for keeping Bougainville within PNG, but granting it further autonomy.

Following a 40-day period to allow for disputes of results, the two governments are required to enter into a "consultation" process if the pro-independence vote predominates. PNG's Minister for Bougainville Affairs Puka Temu told Radio NZ that PNG will seek to ensure

the vote doesn't trigger a break-up of the state. He urged Bougainville to allow PNG time to "process the result."

The referendum takes place amid intensifying geo-strategic rivalries. Australian imperialism regards its former colony PNG as being on the front line of great power competition with China. Australia's media is pushing an increasingly hysterical anti-China campaign in which the Pacific is viewed as an area of growing economic, diplomatic and military conflict.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* warned on November 17 that if PNG delays or does not ratify the outcome, Bougainville could unilaterally declare independence and "be recognised by some Pacific countries—and China." The Sydney-based Lowy Institute declared that Canberra must "step up its engagement" with Bougainville in order to retain its position as the main "security broker in Melanesia."

Washington will also be watching developments closely. The US regards PNG as a key element in its strategic confrontation with Beijing. Speaking to a Congressional committee in 2011 following a visit to PNG, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton lauded the massive US-owned ExxonMobil gas project and declared: "We are in a competition with China... China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us."

The *Herald* claimed last month that while Australian-led multi-national companies are jostling for mining rights, China is showing "considerable interest" in Bougainville, offering \$US1 billion worth of infrastructure and seeking Bougainville's mineral wealth as "collateral." A prominent independence leader, Sam Kauona, claimed to have received overtures from Chinese companies, with development proposals including bridges, a port, a highway, an airport and a luxury resort.

Kauona told the 9Now's "60 Minutes" program that China's offer is currently "plan A." "It seems that

Western banks are closed to us but eastern ones are open. China has made a proposal and we are still waiting to hear from our Australian and American friends if they have any proposals,” he declared.

At the centre of competing local and international interests is the huge Panguna gold and copper mine. Following PNG’s formal independence in 1975, the mine provided 45 percent of the country’s export income. Previously operated by one of the world’s largest mining companies, the Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto group, Panguna has been mothballed since the Bougainville crisis erupted but is estimated to contain \$US58 billion worth of mineral reserves.

From the start, Panguna provoked protests and resentments, generating widespread opposition to the mine itself and the Australian colonial administration. In 1988, landowners began sabotaging its operations, demanding higher royalty payments. For six years, the PNG army, armed and assisted by Australia, attempted to crush the BRA in a campaign that saw as many as 15,000 people killed.

The Australian and PNG governments regarded the crushing of the uprising as critical, not just for the future of the Rio Tinto project but also the security of mining interests throughout PNG. Australian companies have been at the forefront of plundering the country’s natural resources through huge and highly profitable mining projects.

Australia’s operations in Bougainville in the mid-to-late 1990s, with New Zealand in support, were its most substantial since the Vietnam war. About 2,000 Australian military personnel and 260 civilian officials served there. The operations presaged later Pacific interventions in Timor-Leste, the Solomon Islands and other political upheavals in the Pacific following the 1997-98 Asian financial meltdown.

After it became obvious that the PNG military could not defeat the BRA, Canberra changed tack to impose a settlement. In 1997 the PNG government led by Prime Minister Julius Chan hired a mercenary outfit, Sandline International, in a desperate bid to suppress the separatist movement. The Australian government leaked the secret plans, provoking large protests in Port Moresby and a virtual rebellion in the PNG armed forces, compelling Chan to stand down.

The Sandline deal had threatened to allow unnamed business interests to reopen the Panguna mine at the expense of Australian-owned companies. PNG’s former defence commander Jerry Singirok, who played the

pivotal role for Canberra in forcing Chan to step down, indicated plans were already under discussion for a full Australian military intervention.

The Burnham Agreement, ending hostilities, was signed shortly thereafter, with New Zealand leading the negotiations. A so-called Peace Monitoring Group comprising 300 military personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Vanuatu and Fiji, along with civilian administrators, was deployed on Bougainville as a precursor to the formal cease-fire.

Limited autonomy has done nothing to improve the living standards for the majority of the population. Roughly 90 percent of people lead a subsistence life in rural hamlets and villages. There is no radio or television and no funds for education, health and infrastructure. Half the population is illiterate. Arawa, the impoverished capital remains devastated from the civil war, with just 1,000 residents, some shops, a medical clinic and few buildings intact.

The local elite is manoeuvring to take advantage of looming business opportunities. Kauona told Radio NZ on December 2 that “Chinese [investors] are welcome. Japanese, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, all welcome,” promising that “good laws” would protect the interests of the Bougainville people.

In fact, ordinary people will not see any benefits from independence, should it go ahead. Like PNG itself, the country will remain backward and impoverished, and completely dependent on the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand.

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