

Bougainville votes for independence from Papua New Guinea

By John Braddock
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The result of the independence vote on the islands which make up Bougainville, a semi-autonomous region of Papua New Guinea (PNG), was announced on December 10. Polling took place over two weeks with voters asked to choose between continued autonomy within PNG or becoming independent.

The Bougainville Referendum Commission chairman, former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, announced that 176,928 of a total 181,067—a 98.3 percent majority—chose independence. Only 3,043 voted for greater autonomy within PNG. The overwhelming result was achieved with a turnout of 85 percent of those enrolled.

The non-binding referendum was part of the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement which ended a protracted and bloody civil war that claimed some 15,000 lives. It was the culmination of a process initiated in 1997 by Australia, the former colonial power, after the PNG military failed to defeat an insurgency led by the self-styled Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).

The Australian and PNG governments regarded crushing the uprising militarily as critical to secure mining interests on Bougainville and throughout PNG. Australian companies were at the forefront of plundering the country's natural resources through highly profitable mining projects. After it became obvious that PNG could not defeat the BRA, Canberra changed tack to impose a settlement through the peace deal.

Under the agreement, the referendum vote must now be ratified by PNG's parliament. A joint taskforce of the PNG and Autonomous Bougainville (ABG) governments is required to consult over the next phase of the process, without a fixed timeline. PNG Minister for Bougainville Affairs Puka Temu said he would not formally present the result to parliament until after consultation has taken place.

The PNG cabinet is reported to be considering up to ten years for a possible transition. Prime Minister James

Marape assured the people of Bougainville the government had “heard” them, but did not explicitly commit to backing independence. He said the two governments must develop “a road map that leads to a lasting political settlement that the National Parliament can consider.”

Temu told Radio NZ last month that the national government will seek to ensure the vote does not trigger a break-up of PNG. In response to explosive social tensions across PNG created by the austerity measures and police-state policies of successive governments, opposition sentiment and separatist movements have erupted in East New Britain, Central Province, Lae, the Highlands and Northern (Oro) Province.

At the same time, expectations have been raised in Bougainville that the referendum will lead to independence. ABG President John Momis said both governments must “negotiate in good faith... with the aim of getting an outcome that is acceptable to both sides.” Radio NZ reported that within Bougainville, “security fears” will emerge if the result is not implemented quickly.

Sections of the pro-independence movement, such as the former militant group Me'ekamui, boycotted the poll claiming Bougainville is already independent following a 1990 Universal Declaration of Independence by late secessionist leader Francis Ona. Referendum security chairman Patrick Nisira, warned that “if we allow a gap in there, these people might come in and might actually convince people that the national government and the ABG are not genuine in what they're doing.”

At the same time, a contest is underway, both within rival sections of the local elite and between various global mining companies over control of Bougainville's single major asset, 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.

Panguna was operated by one of the world's largest mining companies, the Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto group, but has been mothballed since the Bougainville crisis erupted. It is estimated to contain \$US58 billion worth of mineral reserves.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on December 11 that the tussle for Panguna had already “sparked a race to promise the best deal and the highest royalties to landowners while stemming the environmental degradation that has ravaged Bougainville.” The race had set off “intense political disagreement between rival groups on the island.”

Overtures by Australian-led multinational mining companies have seen “intense politicking” among local landowner groups and political players on Bougainville. Momis initially supported a moratorium on mining at Panguna to avoid reigniting conflicts between landowner groups. The moratorium was established in early 2018, but the Bougainville government now appears to favour opening up the mine to underwrite independence.

Landowners are guaranteed rights under a 2015 Mining Act, but in order to raise funds for the referendum the government proposed in January to abolish those rights while allocating “near monopoly” rights to an Australian company, Caballus Mining. The legislation was rejected by the government's legislative committee illustrating, according to the *Herald*, just “how politically contentious this issue will be in an independent Bougainville.”

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, which regard PNG as being on the front line of great power competition with China, will view any change to the geo-strategic order following any move to independence with hostility. As allies of Washington's build up to war with Beijing, they allege China is aggressively seeking influence and economic power across the Pacific and are actively moving to counteract it.

In the lead-up to the referendum the Sydney-based Lowy Institute declared that whatever the outcome, Canberra must “step up its engagement” with Bougainville if it wished to remain “a trusted peace and security broker in Melanesia.” If the ABG is unable to reach agreement with PNG over future independence, the institute warned, “the Bougainville issue may precipitate another regional crisis.”

Australian media is already stirring up fears of purported Chinese designs on Bougainville. The *Herald* reported a “rumour” that in 2018 a Chinese delegation offered \$US1 billion to help finance a transition to

independence. The proposed “master plan” included a highway, airport, port, bridges and a luxury resort. The report alleged that China plans to use Bougainville's mineral wealth as “collateral” for the deal.

In fact, it is Australian mining giants that are, in the words of the *Herald*, “slugging it out” to take first advantage of any opportunities. Besides Caballus, the list includes mining magnate Andrew Forrest's company, Fortescue, another chaired by former Liberal Party defence minister David Johnston and one by luxury goods dealer Jeff McGlenn. Rio Tinto's former subsidiary BCL is also involved as well as ASX-listed companies RTG Mining Inc. and Kalia Ltd. The latter has already been granted permits to explore the northern tip of Bougainville.

Ordinary people will gain nothing from this wheeling and dealing. Under limited autonomy the majority of the population has led a subsistence existence in rural hamlets and villages with widespread illiteracy and no funds for education, health and infrastructure. If “independence” does take place, a tiny elite layer will enrich itself on the crumbs from the profits of transnational miners, while most people continue to live in abject poverty and economic backwardness.

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