

## **Bougainville: A New Pacific Nation?**

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**Abstract:** Bougainville, the easternmost province (or sole autonomous region) of Papua New Guinea, has a long history of support for secession and independence, centred on geography, culture and ethnicity. Nationalism intensified with alienation of land by a multinational copper mine during the 1970s, resulting in the island's unilateral declaration as the Republic of the North Solomons, a few weeks before the independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975. That was ignored by PNG and other governments. Nationalism resurfaced in violent form after bitter disputes over the impact of the mine, which was forced to close in 1989, prompting what became a civil war led by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army who sought independence. After foreign intervention, peace was eventually restored in 2001: the Bougainville Peace Agreement gave the province greater autonomy and promised a referendum on independence. Within Bougainville, the contested role of mining is central to economic development, which is currently heavily dependent on aid. In a late-2019 referendum, 98 percent of voters supported independence. The Papua New Guinea government need not acquiesce to that outcome and has delayed negotiations that would shape a new political future. Such negotiations exist within a geopolitical context where a Chinese presence is increasingly significant, and where most regional nations, including Papua New Guinea and Australia, prefer the status quo.

**Keywords:** Bougainville, economy, geopolitics, independence, mining, nationalism, secession

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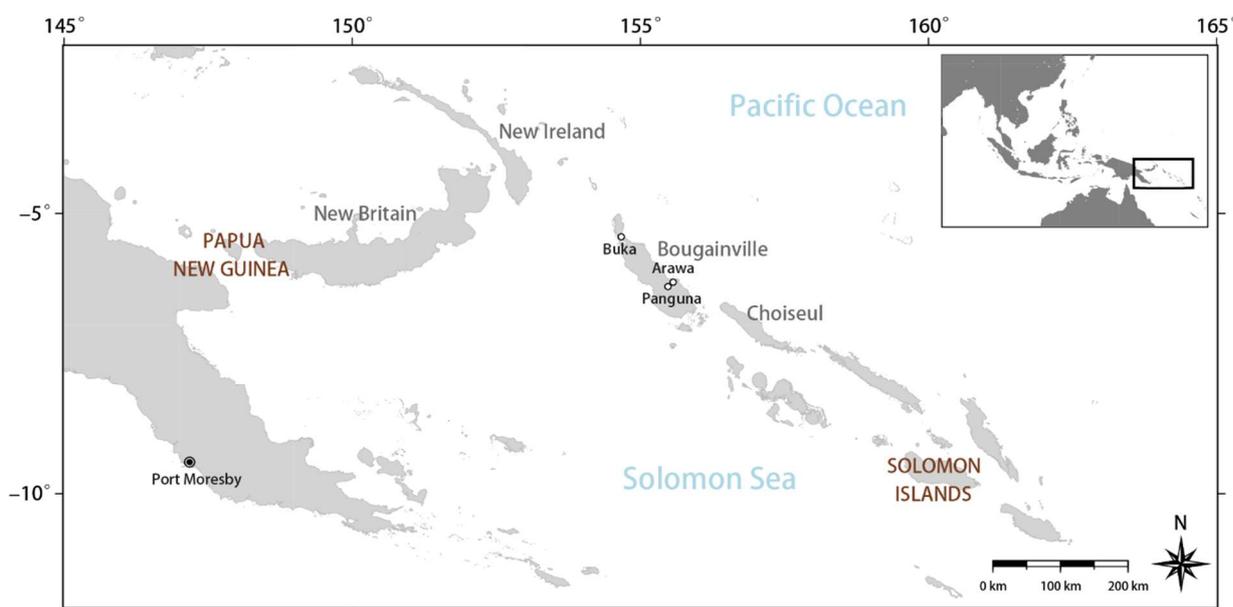
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### **Introduction**

The land is awash with blood – ‘Blut I kapsait na wasim graun’ - and our people have died in vain if they do not gain their freedom (Havini, 2004, p. 118).

This paper recounts and accounts for the quest for independence on the Melanesian island of Bougainville which has long sought secession from Papua New Guinea (PNG). Bougainville, an island with almost 300,000 people and twenty language groups, is collectively culturally distinct and geographically separate from the rest of PNG. It represents a ‘classic’ ethno-nationalist secessionist struggle that acquired materialist overtones. At different times since the 1970s (with Bougainville declaring unilateral independence in 1975, three weeks before that of PNG), its people have sought secession, fought a civil war over independence in the 1990s, and voted almost unanimously for it in a 2019 referendum. The choice of independence (by 98 percent of the vote) is however subject to PNG endorsement, a crucial limitation in a strategically important region. Were Bougainville to become independent, that would be exceptional. Few countries have become independent in recent decades, and those that have offer problematic precedents. The paper assesses the political, economic and social challenges that Bougainville currently experiences and the probability of a successful outcome.

**Figure 1. Map of Bougainville and its geographical neighbourhood.**



Secessionist campaigns are widespread, with varied impetus, significance and violence. Few if any countries lack (usually peripheral) regions and distinct ethnic groups seeking some separate status. Many secessionist movements have flourished, but usually failed, as many peoples see themselves as oppressed and marginalised, with valid claims to some form of autonomy that accords with a sense of separate identity. In Europe, independence movements in Scotland and Catalonia provide recent and dramatic evidence that the quest for national sovereignty is not limited to the formal former colonial world (Connell and Aldrich, 2020). Where differences between centres and peripheries are seemingly much greater, whether in ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic terms, it is little surprise that secessionist sentiments remain powerful in many places, including Bougainville. That is particularly so in Melanesia, where contemporary states are both quite recent creations and colonial constructions, and where an independence movement has been active in West Papua for over half a century. Moreover, there are some parallels between Bougainville and New Caledonia – a different Melanesian case – where a similar referendum took place in 2018 after a similar period of greater autonomy, but with a somewhat different outcome.

### **PNG: A Secessionist History?**

Papua New Guinea, with a current population of about nine million, consists of diverse regions, islands, languages and cultural groups. The nation, which gained independence from Australia in 1975, is a colonial creation: with ‘artificial’ borders with Indonesia on the west, Australia to the south, and with Solomon Islands to the east, all of which cut across cultural groups and social networks. In the 1960s and early 1970s, several regions and social groups sought secession prior to the independence of PNG. These operated at different scales and with different degrees of effectiveness, particularly in Papua and New Britain (May, 1982; McKillop, 1982). Similar quests existed in other Melanesian colonies, including the Western Province of Solomon Islands, where a Western Breakaway Movement appeared (Paia, 1974; Premdas et al., 1984), and on the islands of Tanna and Santo in New Hebrides, which resulted in a brief period of violent rebellion on Santo prior to the independence of Vanuatu (Shears,

1980; Beasant, 1984). In New Caledonia, where there was French opposition to independence, despite regional and cultural differences, Kanaks (Melanesians) broadly combined into a single entity to seek independence. Throughout Melanesia, these early movements centred on land and identity, were strongest where land alienation was greatest, and shared some affinity with earlier movements such as the Hahalis Welfare Society of Buka and Maasina Rure (Marching Rule) in the Solomon Islands which also emphasised the retention and return of ancestral land (Connell, 1988).

Bougainville's quest for independence was particularly assertive, and the one most obviously based on cultural and geographical distinctiveness, alongside food security, a reasonably prosperous economy centred on cocoa cultivation, a relatively educated population and the anticipation of mine revenue. Bougainville constitutes two adjoining high islands, part of a single landmass, where most of the population live; along five outlying atolls, two with primarily Polynesian populations (see [Figure 1](#)). The smaller island, Buka, now hosts the administrative centre. At a time of lower sea levels during the last Ice Age, when the islands were already populated, Bougainville was part of a single 'Greater Bougainville' that included Choiseul, Santa Isabel and other of the present western Solomon Islands (Spriggs, 2005). Bougainville became part of a German protectorate in 1886, alongside Choiseul, Santa Isabel and several other islands of the Solomon archipelago. The present-day boundary between Bougainville and what is now the country of the Solomon Islands was established following an 1899 Tripartite Convention between Germany, the UK and the United States, which saw all the northern islands except Bougainville ceded to the UK. Bougainville was thus detached from the rest of the archipelago, most significantly from the adjoining Shortland Islands. During the First World War, Australia occupied German New Guinea, including Bougainville, which became part of the Australian Territory of New Guinea until PNG secured independence in 1975.

About 20 languages (in three main language groups) are used on Bougainville, with Tok Pisin the lingua franca, indicating some cultural differences within Bougainville. However, all societies are matrilineal, except on the two Polynesian atolls, a characteristic shared with the eastern islands of PNG, but not with mainland New Guinea. Unlike most Papua New Guineans, who are sometimes referred to as 'redskins', Bougainvilleans have black skins, a characteristic shared with the nearby Solomon Islands. Collectively, these physical and social characteristics provide some regional distinctiveness and sense of regional identity, first emerging in a political sense in the 1960s. The earlier plantation era had built a sense of regional identity related to skin colour, where Bougainvilleans had worked alongside others on coastal plantations (Nash and Ogan, 1990). As significantly, Bougainvilleans never felt themselves to be Papua New Guineans (Tanis, 2005) but perceived themselves as distinct in ethnicity, with customs more akin to those of the western Solomon Islands to their east rather than with New Guinea to the west.

Localised proto-nationalist movements existed in the 1960s. As elsewhere in Melanesia, initial interest in independence came from newly educated and youthful seminarians and university graduates, at a time when other colonies in Asia and Africa were acquiring independence. The Mungkas Association ('black') was formed at the UPNG in the early 1970s mainly by students from the south who took the lead in pressing for secession but rarely got beyond the educated class. While it emerged from a sense of ethnic and geographical identity, it emphasised central administrative neglect and thus the need for local autonomy and authority (Griffin, 1972), as in other contemporaneous Pacific contexts, but came to nothing in the colonial era without political organisation or a deeply shared sense of grievance.

## **Enter Panguna**

The single most significant impact on the rise of nationalism in Bougainville was the Australian administration's push to prospect for minerals in Bougainville and encourage the construction of a mine at Panguna, in the centre of the island, both activities strongly opposed by local people. By 1964, early exploration had indicated that the island had rich metal deposits and mining would be commercially viable. Heavy-handed exclusion of local people from decision-making and involvement accompanied resistance to intrusions on local land. A visit by the Australian External Affairs Minister, Charles Barnes, in mid-1966 led to further deterioration of relations between Bougainvilleans and the colonial administration. Barnes told Bougainvilleans that the project would benefit PNG 'as a whole'. This had no resonance to Bougainvilleans who could not understand why they should sacrifice their land so that PNG might benefit. Nor were they responsive to arguments that their land tenure applied only to the surface but not to what was beneath it. On an island where Indigenous relationships were effectively written on the ground, land and identity converged. The Australian administration, backed by armed police, gave access to prospectors while informing residents that their land was being taken over without discussion. While nationalist sentiment had existed prior to the mine, colonial pressure for mining was the catalyst to opposition to the PNG Administration, for Bougainvillean nationalism and initial demands for secession.

In 1967, the administration signed an agreement with the new giant mining company Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL), two-thirds owned by Conzinc Riotinto of Australia. Construction of the mine resulted in unparalleled land alienation, and violent opposition to processes of land acquisition. People blocked access to land, crying 'we weep for what is being done to our land' (quoted in Griffin et al., 1979, p. 153). Alongside land alienation, Bougainvilleans objected to the fundamental economic premise of the mine, that its profits would benefit the entire nation, perceiving it as an island resource that would be the basis of the provincial economy and of an eventual independent state. In the 1970s, a couple of years after mineral exports had begun, the then provincial Premier, Alexis Sarei, (later to become first President of the Republic of the North Solomons) pointedly queried, 'Are we to be a fat cow, milked for the rest of Papua New Guinea?' (quoted in Connell, 1976, p. 652). Its growing presence through the early 1970s brought continued opposition and a growing demand for secession.

A loose political organisation,, Napidakoe Navitu ('we unite'), was established in 1969 in the Kieta area, uniting islanders of different religions and districts and unsuccessfully sought to hold a referendum on independence. More distant islanders in the south and north argued against an early referendum and first sought greater autonomy, pointing to differences of opinion across the province (Mamak and Bedford, 1974). Such differences were largely over strategy rather than aspiration, about control and authority, as about legitimacy and identity. Growing pressures for a more representative island government led to blunt warnings that there might otherwise be a second Biafra. Few had given any thought to what an independent PNG might look like; but emerging leaders, including Leo Hannett and John Momis, had often talked of Nyerere and Tanzanian socialism.

In 1972, Australia granted Bougainville some degree of autonomy, but this failed to end the growing secessionist movement. Relations between Bougainville and the PNG government deteriorated further after the murder of two prominent Bougainvillean public servants in the PNG highlands in 1972, following a road accident, which shaped opposition to cultural practices argued to be alien from those of Bougainville. One consequence was the establishment of a Bougainville Special Political Committee (BSPC) to negotiate with the administration on the future of Bougainville. Its suggestion that a specified share of Panguna

mining profits be given to the people of Bougainville was rejected, and in May 1975, negotiations collapsed completely. Tensions worsened as PNG moved towards independence and the issues were not resolved. Frustrations focused on the lack of local autonomy and the role of the mine, with continued pressure for a greater share of profits for Bougainville both as a basis for its economic development and independence, and compensation for the alienation of land. That coincided with a restructuring of local government councils that were perceived as anachronistic and were gradually being replaced across the province with local village government structures that accorded with local values and scales (Connell, 1977). Local governance and local values were being afforded more significance in opposition to PNG hegemony.

### **The Republic of the North Solomons**

Disputes over the allocation of mining income caused an unresolved three-way impasse between the PNG administration, the national parliament, and the Bougainville government. Early in 1975, the Interim Provincial Government in Bougainville decided to secede, and on 1 September 1975, two weeks before the independence of PNG, Bougainville declared its own unilateral independence as the Republic of the North Solomons (RNS). This was ignored in PNG, and no other countries or the United Nations offered support (following the principle that colonies should accede to independence with colonial borders intact). The RNS also failed in an attempt to unite with the Solomon Islands, although the Western Islands District Council of the Solomon Islands, with about a third of the British colony's population, sought to join an independent Bougainville.

Tensions escalated and in mid-1976, a PNG police riot squad was sent to southern Bougainville to restore order, after damage to state buildings. John Momis, then Chairman of the RNS ruling council, denounced this as an invasion. Concerns over security on the island and RNS failure to achieve any international recognition eventually led to talks between the PNG Government and RNS leaders, with a settlement being reached in August 1976 allowing for increased decentralisation, greater self-government than in the 17 other PNG provinces and Bougainville being renamed the North Solomons Province. For the remainder of the 1970s, and into the early 1980s, relations between the two governments remained tense, but relatively peaceful.

The RNS expected to draw most, if not all, of its revenue from the Bougainville mine. Reference was frequently made to the way the tiny island of Nauru had achieved independence, linked to the success of phosphate mining there, and that Bougainville had distinctly more natural resources than Nauru. It also had a superior education and health status to most of PNG. Bougainville might then have achieved independence, with as much potential for viability and stability as most other Pacific island states. The rationale for independence was then linked to three key themes. First, the ethnic and cultural distinctiveness of Bougainville, where a history of social and economic ties with the Solomon Islands, was emphasised. Second, Bougainvilleans stressed that it was their right to choose their political destiny, and that colonialism had been imposed upon them, first by Germany, and then by Britain, Australia and finally PNG, and that, given the choice, they would have always preferred a separate existence. Third, it was argued that Bougainville would be economically viable, and that viability would stem from the success of mining and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. Secessionist notions reflected cultural identity, history, geography and economics.

### **The Rise and Fall of Panguna**

Though Bougainville did not become the Republic of the North Solomons, the first twelve years of independence of PNG cast few doubts on the province's economic potential.

Mining, alongside valuable cocoa exports, provided an economic core. A trans-island road brought superior access to the mine, towns and the port, enabling increased export incomes and formal employment. The mine itself spent money on social services and infrastructure provision. Mining generated enormous profits (less than ten per cent of which went to the province), cocoa produced considerable wealth for most households, health and education improved steadily, and the province acquired a reputation as one of the most stable and progressive in the country.

The failed RNS was largely ignored in the post-independence years, because of a decentralised provincial administration, local involvement, improved services and rising household incomes. However, a combination of alienation of land (that was limited early on), inadequate compensation, the distribution of mine profits (initially poorly understood) and environmental degradation, resulted in growing concerns especially close to the mine site. While the mine had provided compensation, new infrastructure (including schools and health posts) and priority employment at the mine, local villagers were distraught at the extent of environmental degradation. Nearby villages, notably Guava, had feared such a fate even before the mine had opened (Momis and Ogan, 1972; West, 1972), and now foresaw its imminent arrival (Connell, 1991; Filer, 1990). From 1981, such issues cast shadows over the developments of the late 1970s, but were largely ignored by both the Bougainville Provincial Government and the PNG government.

The sharing of mine revenue gradually became a major source of contention between the Bougainville and PNG governments. At a very different scale, the operations of the mine were increasingly opposed by Bougainvilleans close to the site, centred on land losses, environmental degradation, sharing of compensation payments and the relative deprivation of the mine landowners, who should have been the principal beneficiaries. In 1979, Perpetua Serero, the President of the New Panguna Landowners Association, said,

We have become mere spectators as our earth is being dug up, taken away and sold for millions. Our land was taken away from us by force: we were blind then, but we have finally grown to understand what's going on (quoted in Orsag 2020)

The PNG and Bougainville governments failed to instigate tripartite reviews of the mine lease at seven-year intervals and so landowners felt disregarded. Distinct from these concerns, many Bougainvilleans opposed growing numbers of outsiders (male mineworkers and others) from a racist and ethnic perspective, and over social concerns. A combination of anxieties reached critical proportions, crudely a 'resource curse', not entirely absent in other mine sites (Filer, 1990; Adamo, 2018). BCL commissioned an international review by a New Zealand company, but one of its conclusions – that not all environmental damage in Bougainville was a consequence of mining – prompted anger at a meeting in Arawa late in 1988. A prominent landowner from Guava village, Francis Ona, the cousin of Perpetua Serero and himself a mineworker, stormed out of the meeting, resigned from BCL, and subsequently formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). Within a few months, a small group of militants had effectively damaged and destroyed mining infrastructure and fired on personnel to the extent that the mine closed down in May 1989. A decade long crisis had begun.

### **The Crisis and Civil War**

After landowner disputes over the impact of the mine flared into open violence, resulting in its closure, and a wider uprising, the island experienced unparalleled crisis. The struggle for greater compensation and profits from, and less environmental damage by, the mine, was transformed into an island-wide struggle for independence. The BRA had closed the mine,

halfway through its economic life, and launched a secessionist war, in circumstances and with consequences and regional ramifications open to multiple interpretations (e.g. Regan, 1998; Kenema, 2010; Adamo, 2018; Lasslett, 2014; Filer, 1990; Quodling, 1991; Hatutasi, 2015).

By the end of 1988, economic development effectively ended, political stability disintegrated and the positive evolution of human resources was thrown into disarray. The Premier of Bougainville, Joseph Kabui, and John Momis, the MP for Bougainville in the PNG parliament, supported Ona and the BRA. Violence increased and the PNG Defence Force was introduced. Human rights abuses by the PNG army accentuated the divisions between Bougainville and PNG. In 1990, PNG imposed a blockade on Bougainville. Francis Ona responded by unilaterally declaring independence, and setting up the Bougainville Interim Government; but it had little power, and the island descended into further violence and chaos. Opposition to Ona grew in some districts, to some extent against the more militant Nasioi who commanded the mine site, fracturing the secessionist movement, in terms of different short-term objectives and attitudes to force rather than the independence outcome. Especially in the south, a Resistance movement emerged that supported independence but sought some reconciliation with PNG (Hatutasi, 2015). Localised conflict between the BRA and Resistance forces brought deaths and divisions within villages and clans.

Continued violence and warfare, and failed peace agreements, resulted in prominent leaders, Sam Kauona and Joseph Kabui, breaking with Ona, and entering into peace talks with the PNG government. This culminated in the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) in August 2001. PNG began to withdraw its military from the island, a multinational Peace Monitoring Group arrived, composed of military and civilians from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu, in co-operation with a small UN Observer Mission. A Bougainville interim provincial government of the same status as the other eighteen provinces of Papua New Guinea was established in January 1999. An organised reconciliation process began across much of Bougainville. A declining but powerful group of supporters of Francis Ona had dissented from movement towards the peace agreement, and effectively remained in control of the mine site in defiance of peace elsewhere and in support of a self-proclaimed Republic of Me'ekamu. Although Ona died in 2005, the 'Republic' has remained in place in the Panguna area. As part of the BPA, an independence referendum was to be held at some time in the 2010s.

During the civil war, Australia supported PNG: the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, argued that 'Bougainville must remain an integral part' of PNG (quoted in Bohane, 2019, p. 7), but Australia also sought to facilitate peace talks. Many in Bougainville regarded BCL as having supported the PNG government and the military. Panguna landowners accused the company of genocide, citing the company's support for the blockade of the island by PNG forces, claiming that the mine's manager in Bougainville at the time 'encouraged the continuation of the blockade for the purposes of starving the bastards out' (quoted in Jubilee Australia, 2014, p.10). The former PNG Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, stated that 'BCL was directly involved in the military operations on Bougainville, and it ... supplied helicopters, which were used as gunships, the pilots, troop transportation, fuel and troop barracks' (quoted in McDonald, 2019a).

More than a thousand deaths had occurred, the provincial economy disintegrated (as communications were cut, infrastructure destroyed and the island blockaded and isolated from trade). Most primary and secondary schools closed for years, and children missed years of education, including many youthful combatants. The years of violence traumatised many, eroded trust, respect and community, and devastated decades of peaceful change and evolution. Violence and tensions were particularly complex and endemic in southern Bougainville,

symbolised by several murders and retaliation, even within villages. Two decades later, allegations of guilt and complicity, and the continued need for reconciliation, have continued to complicate movement towards stability.

### **Towards peace and stability**

The gradual consolidation of peace, guided by the United Nations and an external Peace Monitoring Group, was accompanied by complex debates over the political future of the island. Bougainville initially became an ‘autonomous political entity’ and then in 2005 an ‘autonomous region’ with the guarantee that there would be a referendum on complete independence within fifteen years. That provision was remarkably similar to that adopted at much the same time between New Caledonia and France. In both cases, the lengthy period was intended to ensure that tensions were defused and that, during that period, the national government might be able to demonstrate the advantages of retaining the existing political structure (MacLellan and Regan, 2018; Connell, 2019).

The Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) has effective control of its economy, and receives some financial support from PNG (that constitutes about 80% of the budget). The ABG has wide-ranging powers over all but foreign affairs, defence and finance. Its House of Representatives comprises 33 constituency members, three women’s representatives, three former combatant representatives and a speaker (appointed from outside by the other members of parliament). The four national MPs for Bougainville are also afforded places in the parliament. The major challenge of the new ABG was to revitalise the economy without a mine, and demonstrate its effective commitment to rebuilding a Bougainville that could accede to independence. The crisis had taken a major toll on social and economic life. Local markets had revived, but on a very small scale, partly because subsistence was now ubiquitously important – as wage employment had collapsed – and partly because cash was scarce. Financial constraints limited infrastructure and service development, especially away from the new urban centre of Buka.

Despite the period between the signing of the BPA and the referendum being partly designed to enable the PNG government to establish its credentials in Bougainville by supporting reconstruction with adequate provision of services, the ABG often received only a fraction of what was promised under the BPA; this creating frustration for the ABG rather than recognition of partnership and shared objectives. Power and functions were only transferred slowly. That hampered the ABG’s effectiveness in development of infrastructure and services, though it generally performed more effectively than other provinces (Wallis, 2012b). PNG was somewhat reluctant to finance a region on which it had wasted so much money in the civil war and where Papua New Guineans had died in vain. The PNG government was constantly criticised by the ABG leaders, notably President John Momis, for renegeing on promises and formal agreements. Nevertheless, Bougainville was again slowly moving in the direction of much greater political and economic independence.

### **Towards the Referendum**

The economy revived, politics stabilised somewhat and impetus towards the referendum began to develop in the late-2010s. The lack of funding delayed preparations for the referendum, since time was needed to complete an adequate register of voters (partly to meet external scrutiny), and the referendum eventually required additional funding from the United Nations (Boege, 2019; Regan, 2019). The reluctance by the PNG government to advance promised funds to the ABG and the delay were precursors of what was to come.

In the lead-up to the referendum, Bougainvillean leaders argued that the island had the means to manage its own affairs, and sought to re-establish large-scale mining, despite this being seen by some close to the mine site as ‘standing on the blood of those who died’ (quoted in Jubilee Australia, 2014, p.33): a clear indication that development strategies involving mining would not be easy to implement. There was no hint of the loosely ‘socialist’ future discussed in the early 1970s and virtually no discussion of what an independent state might look like and how it might depart, if at all, from the existing development trajectory. Changes that would be necessary in an independent state, such as defence, currency or access to foreign aid, were hardly mooted.

Autonomy would have meant more limited powers but would have given Bougainville greater control over foreign aid, international trade, taxation and labour laws, a context much like those that link Niue and the Cook Islands to New Zealand; and Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia to the United States. PNG would have retained control over defence and foreign affairs. It is unlikely that PNG would have matched the aid delivery that New Zealand and the United States deliver to those states (although there would be little interest in much greater migration to PNG, a key element of their arrangements).

During the referendum period, access to information was limited. PNG’s radio service reached only parts of northern Bougainville and Buka (about a quarter of the region) and there were no alternative sources of radio information. Meetings were conducted throughout Bougainville, and local information and awareness campaigns had begun in 2018 (Boege, 2019). From around mid-2019, an independent Referendum Commission, chaired by the former Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, travelled widely in Bougainville to explain the processes. At all meetings organised by Bougainvilleans, the directive was to vote for independence. Genevieve Korokoro, the Deputy Mayor of Arawa, explained,

This is your chance. You suffered for it. It is your only chance to decide on the political future of Bougainville. I’m for independence. It’s been from our forefathers, from colonial times’ (quoted in McDonald, 2019, p. 54).

Such meetings produced evidence of widespread support for independence. Once dissident groups, notably Me’ekamui, eventually came out in favour, and agreed to vote.

In contrast, elsewhere in PNG, opposition to Bougainville becoming independent dominated opinion. Within parliament, most MPs opposed independence on the grounds of precedent, but a few supported the possibility (Bohane, 2019). The greatest concern was that Bougainville’s independence would revive claims to independence in the nearby islands of New Ireland and New Britain which had often sought their own independence (occasionally in combination with Bougainville). Sir Puka Temu, the Minister for Bougainville in the PNG government, stated before the referendum,

We don’t want any part of Papua New Guinea to break away. We don’t want to set a precedent for the other 21 provinces. That will be our firm position (quoted on RNZ, 25 November 2020)

The Prime Minister, James Marape, supported that perspective, arguing that PNG was stronger with Bougainville than without it, and unity through greater autonomy was the preferred outcome. Two months before the referendum, he took the entire cabinet to the island and promised Bougainville a billion kina (US\$ 290 million) for development over the following decade (McDonald, 2019, p. 56). There was still some residual belief that Bougainville’s mineral resources might still provide future revenue for PNG. Support for independence within

PNG was mainly pragmatic: reflecting concerns that violence might erupt if independence was thwarted, and that a troublesome province might best be cast off. Few recognised any moral principles that accorded rights to Bougainville.

### **November-December 2019: The Referendum**

The island moved towards the referendum in a positive spirit, unlike popular feeling in PNG, with an externally sanctioned process and a valid electoral roll. Monitoring was undertaken by the Referendum Commission, present before during and after the vote. Non-resident Bougainvilleans were enrolled; hence, voting booths were open in every province of PNG, Solomon Islands (Honiara and Gizo) and Australia (Brisbane and Cairns). Some 202,000 voters were registered in Bougainville, about 12,000 in PNG and 200 in Solomon Islands and Australia. Over 300 voting booths were located across Bougainville. Voting was intended to be spread over two weeks but such was the enthusiasm that, in most of the 33 electorates, it was over in a few days.

The final vote was 176,928 (97.7%) in favour of independence, 3043 (1.7%) in favour of greater autonomy, and with 1096 (0.6%) informal votes. The ballot papers were deliberately counted together to prevent any suggestion of regional differences, although the outcome suggested that any regional variations were trivial. The reticence that some of the people of Buka had held in the 1990s, or atoll residents had in the 1970s (who feared for the future of their islands with an increasing population and a shortage of land), had apparently dissipated. The high turnout (around 90 percent) and the few informal votes suggested that voters were well informed over the significance of the referendum and what was at stake. It was rather more than symbolic that many voters chose to adopt some variant of ‘traditional dress’ for voting, which was often accompanied by cultural activities. Ubiquitously, the vote was an expression of faith in Bougainville rather than a rejection of PNG. The civil war two decades earlier was not an ‘issue’ and PNG was not regarded as a ‘colonial oppressor’, despite the frequent disputes over the allocation of resources to the island.

### **Political Acquiescence?**

Euphoric Bougainvilleans assumed that this was now the end-game: the island would proceed to independence. It was reiterated that the result was conclusive and that only one outcome was appropriate. As a former ABG President, James Tanis, said,

We survived the war, ended the war, delivered a successful referendum; what else can stop us from becoming a successful independent state (quoted in Powles, 2019).

John Momis simply stated that independence was inevitable (Radio New Zealand, 26 February 2020). The sentiment of the referendum was well expressed by Andrew Miriki, a former ABG Speaker,

That reflects on the voice and decision of the people of Bougainville. That decision is in front of the ABG, the chiefs, the churches and the people of Bougainville because they stood together to come up with this percentage in their vote for independence. Nobody can question, no other person can say something different, the people stood together for their rights under the Bougainville Peace agreement and their struggle (*Post-Courier*, 12 March 2020).

In Port Moresby, the perspective was quite different. Although the PNG Prime Minister, James Marape, said that the government had heard the voice of Bougainvilleans, and that ‘the two governments must now develop a road map that leads to lasting political settlement’ (quoted in Boyd, 2019), there were constant reminders that the PNG parliament had to approve the final

outcome. PNG could stall independence indefinitely if it regarded the outcome as an unpalatable existential threat.

Similar expressions reflecting the ‘need’ for patience and for careful discussion were expressed by others. Sir Puka Temu stated in the PNG parliament in February 2020,

It is of the utmost importance that the two governments continue to engage whatever the outcome of the consultations. Bougainville and Papua New Guinea will be neighbours forever. We will continue to have many shared interests. It is accordingly important that we pay close attention to the interests, options and issues involved. In this regard, an important consideration for MPs to bear in mind is that the National Constitution does not provide for separation or secession of a part of the country. This means that if the National Parliament were to agree to ratify the referendum outcome in favour of independence, the National Constitution would have to be amended to allow for it to be granted. The National Parliament is not duty-bound to accept the outcome at the first instance but to receive the result, consider it and make the final decision

But he did emphasise that,

We do not want any Bougainvillean voter to think that his or her preference on the ballot paper was expressed in vain. Our overriding objective must be to honour the letter and spirit of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and implementing laws; as well as allow for concerted efforts to continue building and sustaining lasting peace by peaceful means (*Post-Courier*, 19 February 2020).

Prime Minister Marape, confirmed the cautionary perspective: he argued that the government needed to conduct extensive consultations, hinting that the process might take up to five years before the national parliament could ultimately decide on Bougainville's future (particularly because of the need to amend the constitution) and because of a determination to ensure that other parts of the country did not break away from PNG as a result of the Bougainville outcome. Like Sir Puka Temu, he offered a placatory note, in stressing commitment to ensuring that Bougainville's economy, infrastructure and public services were ‘brought up to scratch’ by investing in areas like agriculture, fisheries and forestry so that Bougainville could rebuild and eventually stand “on their own two feet... What's the use in talking about independence or autonomy when you are not economically strong?’ Marape further stated that extensive consultations might take until 2025 when PNG was celebrating 50 years of independence, while PNG supported Bougainville in rebuilding its economy (RNZ, 25 February 2020).

Such formal statements of the need for careful progress were paralleled in the attitude to practical meetings to consider the next stages. A Joint Supervisors Body (JSB) meeting, designed to shape the structure of the consultation process, had been postponed twice by early-March 2020 (since neither side could agree on an agenda). Patrick Nisira, a former Vice-President of the ABG, said there was a danger that islanders could lose patience with such delays,

That's the area that we are most concerned about. Frustration might build up with the national government and the ABG (Autonomous Bougainville Government) if they do not actually move quickly to facilitate for the result to be ratified in parliament (RNZ, 10 December 2019).

Some ex-combatants are still armed, despite a weapons handover under the 2001 BPA, and have always been sceptical of a peaceful transition to independence. A delaying process is

apparently in place (aided by coronavirus) and with ABG elections postponed until September and no talks prior to that.

### **A Viable Economy?**

While independence hangs on political aspirations and agreements, it is reasonable to query whether Bougainville would be a viable new nation. Around 90 percent of the ABG budget of 286 million kina (US\$82 million) comes either from transfers from PNG (about 80 percent) or from overseas aid (about 10 percent), mainly from Australia, emphasising the considerable extent of external dependency and the necessity for a more autonomous development. By the mid-2000s, it was becoming apparent that mining was likely to be crucial to the future economy and thus to the prospects for independence.

Bougainville's future economic structure would be comparable to that of other small island developing states (SIDS) in the Pacific and elsewhere. Constraints to development are reasonably typical of SIDS: reliance on a few primary products, a small domestic market, problems of matching local skills and jobs, dependence on foreign capital and external institutions (such as universities and banks) and a considerable expenditure on public administration, including education and health services, roads and high energy costs (Connell, 2005; 2013). Such 'standard' constraints have been worsened by the crisis that disrupted education, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Bougainville is also vulnerable to climate change, earthquakes and flooding.

Bougainville is a little smaller than Vanuatu, slightly larger than Cyprus, and substantially larger than Trinidad or Malta. It is less remote from metropolitan states, with substantial mineral resources, and considerable agricultural, fisheries and possible tourism potential. Most SIDS do not have complete autonomy, with most dependent for some facets of development—most obviously aid, but also financial services, foreign investment, medical referrals, tertiary education, migration opportunities and so on—on distant metropolitan states. Bougainville would be little different, but would also have complex ties with neighbouring PNG. Two other differences from most SIDS are important: first, Bougainville has a small diaspora population, mostly in PNG; hence remittance flows are small. Second, Bougainville could negotiate the reopening (and even expansion) of a substantial mining industry. That option is very strongly contested in Bougainville.

More than half the population have livelihoods that combine food and cash crop production; hence, incomes are low and the ability to generate national revenue from cash crop sales is limited. No mechanism exists to do this effectively (Chand, 2013). Cocoa generated substantial incomes in the past; before the crisis, Bougainville produced about a quarter of PNG's cocoa (and a sixth of its copra). It has only partially revived since then. Experiments with other crops such as vanilla and chillies have been thwarted by distant or saturated markets. As in other Pacific states, agriculture no longer provides the satisfaction, certainty and security it once did, and employment and income earning opportunities must be created elsewhere. Artisanal fisheries are rare, as Bougainvilleans have tended to turn their backs to the sea; but the potential EEZ could generate considerable fishing lease income. It is almost axiomatic that tourism be a characteristic of island microstates; yet, Bougainville has never had a tourist industry. Facilities would have to be constructed, more adequate airline access achieved and markets established.

The overall economic potential of Bougainville is considerable, compared with the structure of most small Pacific island states; but translating potential into reality is a complex and demanding task. Without migration, remittances and mining, the need for aid will be considerable. Existing alternatives to mining offer some limited growth potential but are quite

inadequate to sustain an independent nation. The two most critical determinants of developing a successful economy relate to access of aid and the unresolved future of mining.

### **Mining: The Special Concern**

Unlike most Pacific SIDS, with the partial exceptions of Solomon Islands, Nauru and Fiji, Bougainville has a past, and a possible future, of mining. Despite Bougainville having substantial gold and copper resources, significantly beyond those currently known at Panguna, mining is unlikely to be revived imminently.

Mining is inextricably linked to the 'old' Bougainville. Its presence provided the catalyst for conflict, and it ended because of disagreements over the distribution of the revenue, between villages and between generations, the structure of compensation and environmental degradation. Disputes and tensions remain over all of these. However, in 2005 the ABG voted in favour of reopening the mine and, over time, militants such as Joseph Kabui and Sam Kauona and other implacable early antagonists of mining, including John Momis, recognised that without mining the Bougainville economy would scarcely support an independent state. Indicative of the future role of mining is the cautious statement in the Strategic Development Plan that,

Government is conscious that mining (large scale and small-scale) has the potential to create tensions, violence and conflicts. We will ensure that any future mining operations are respectful to our people, protect our environment and that the benefits flow through to Bougainvilleans ... The government will work with the landowners and BCL to restart mining in the Panguna area ... Opening the Panguna mine is a priority for the government (ABG, 2018, p. 37).

Critically, no timeline was attached to this.

The Panguna mine was valued at US\$58 billion in 2019. It annually averaged about 45% of PNG's export earnings before its closure in 1989. At the time of its closure, it had generated 16 percent of PNG's annual income every year since 1972, alongside wages and salaries, and a variety of impacts on ancillary services, such as transport, food and infrastructure provision. It was widely estimated to be about halfway through an approximately 30-year life. No other economic activity could come close to matching that impact, on all aspects of Bougainvillean development (both positive and negative).

BCL has retained a presence on the island, and would welcome the opportunity to resume mining. While BCL has long had an exclusive exploration licence and first right of refusal over the site, that has been made more challenging with a decision in January 2018 by the ABG not to grant an extension to the company's exploration licence (presently subject to Judicial Review in the PNG National Court). Several international companies have expressed an interest in reopening the mine. Each has attracted some local support from prominent Bougainvilleans with connections to the mine site (McDonald, 2019a) but the existence of different companies and interests reflects local divisions. Moreover, many landowners in nearby areas are opposed to the restart of mining and the aspirations and livelihoods of villagers closest to the mine site, where there is ambivalence and opposition (Jubilee Australia, 2014). The ability of a small number of committed opponents to destroy a massive international mine is impossible for proponents of mining to forget, and the issues that closed the mine then are little different now. Ultimately, no mining company would seek to invest without universal support for the mine and conditions of stability. Only a substantial Chinese venture might be willing to take the risk. Even were an agreement to be reached on re-establishing mining at Panguna, the restoration of the site and the necessary infrastructure would take at least three years before production and

exports could be restarted (though that process would generate significant employment). Indeed, BCL has estimated that five years would be required and it would cost US\$5.2 billion (McDonald, 2019), dampening expectations of quick profits and local revenue gains.

Considerable mining potential exists and a new mine might benefit from sharing infrastructure constructed in support of Panguna, or offer an alternative site were mining at Panguna to prove impossible. The ABG declared a moratorium on exploration and mining in the Panguna area in 2017 and attention shifted elsewhere. Several companies have been involved in prospecting, particularly in northern Bougainville (McDonald, 2019; Boege, 2019). However, opposition to exploration and prospecting has been strong, and two prospectors were murdered in late 2019 and early 2020. That alone offers a volatile context for any new mining venture.

### **A Social Context**

Social and political development presents challenges, primarily as a consequence of the crisis. Challenges to security, in the conventional sense of external threats, are unlikely; but political and social stability may follow limited social and economic development, in terms of uneven development (between regions, social groups or genders) or the outcome of unsatisfied expectations of what a 'new Bougainville' will bring. Provincial government worked relatively successfully prior to the crisis and it will require a responsive and representative government (and a public service system) to develop a consensual, adaptive and effective policy capacity. However, in many regions, the ABG appears distant and impotent, and any sense of strategic planning, even for infrastructure, has failed to travel down to village level (Connell, 2018).

It has proved impossible to make up the education lost by many during the crisis, presenting a continued problem of such disadvantaged 'youth', who feel deserving after fighting for a cause, hence the retention of ABG parliamentary seats for ex-combatants. Particularly in the south, where there were violent disputes between the BRA and the Resistance, problems remain in a residual youth 'culture of violence' and incomplete reconciliation (Connell, 2005; Keil, 2005; Nash, 2005), and thus localised tensions and disagreement. A legacy of the crisis has disrupted social harmony and uncertainty over public security.

In parts of southern Bougainville, especially discordant groups oppose both the ABG and the PNG government (though they ultimately voted for independence) and have opposed any resumption of mining. The most significant of these are at Me'ekamui, close to Panguna, and its southern counterpart, the Kingdom of Papaala, the latter the outcome of what had been a notorious pyramid money scheme (U-Vistract), under the rule of King David Pei II, formerly Noah Musingku (Cox, 2011; Connell, 2018). It has its own ideology, army, currency and 'foreign relations', at variance with, and specifically rejecting, the existing state, but in intended harmony with custom, and with wider Melanesian society. Important, therefore, is the political will to develop outlying areas with adequate infrastructure and income-earning opportunities, where Bougainvilleans have experienced deprivation and insecurity for many years and might question whether political gains compensate for a decade of sacrifice.

### **Geopolitics**

Bougainville lies in a strategically important region, close to Australia, and where Asian and Pacific regions meet. In recent times, that significance has increased as China has adopted its maritime Belt and Road Initiative: 'The China-Oceania-South Pacific blue economic passage is seen as part of what is termed "the 21st century Maritime Silk Road" that will travel southwards from the South China Sea into the Pacific' (Zhang, 2019). Involvement has

included investment in projects (including a major mine in Madang Province, PNG), loans (sparking a ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ controversy), exploration programs, efforts to develop port facilities and attempts to discourage Pacific SIDS from recognising Taiwan/Republic of China rather than the People’s Republic of China.

This situation has led to a re-involvement of the United Kingdom and the United States in a region both had largely ignored in this century, and also prompted a ‘step-up’ of Australian interests and a ‘reset’ of New Zealand interests. As the former ‘colonial power’ in PNG, and its nearest neighbour, Australia has taken a particular interest in this part of the Pacific.

At the turn of the century, Melanesia was perceived in Australia as an ‘arc of instability’ where political problems – from Timor Leste to Fiji – had frustrated Australian interests and resulted in various interventions, that in some cases (as in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands) were particularly costly. The perception was centred in geographic attitudes to security challenges, with Australia’s main strategic priorities lying in its immediate neighbourhood, where unstable or weak Pacific states could pose a risk to Australia, particularly if they fell under the influence of a hostile power. That perception faded as Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands acquired new stability (Wallis, 2012a), but resurfaced in a new form in the late 2010s as China exercised new interest in the region.

At the start of the Bougainville crisis, in late 1988, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, said,

From a purely self-interested Australian regional security perspective, the fragmentation of PNG is something we see as being a very unhappy development in regional security and stability and one which we would like to see avoided at all costs (quoted in Orsag, 2020)

A decade later, a prominent Australian public servant argued that ‘sentimental notions of self-determination, for the East Timorese and Bougainvilleans, amongst others, threaten national security’ (quoted in Aldrich and Connell, 1998, p. 249). That perspective has never changed. When PNG Prime Minister Marape stated before the referendum that its outcome was non-binding and ‘subject to consultations’ between the PNG and Bougainville governments, and independence was certainly not guaranteed, the Australian Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, merely added, ‘Australia looks forward to continued productive engagement between the two governments.’ (quoted in *The Australian*, 12 December 2020). Beyond similar anodyne statements of neutrality, Australia has no interest in Bougainvillean independence, and is increasingly concerned over a wider Chinese presence in the region.

China is anxious to extend diplomatic support in the Pacific (and reduce support for Taiwan) while gaining access to mineral and fisheries resources. Bougainville potentially provides all three of these. Despite its own internal challenges to territorial integrity, China is much the most likely country to be supportive of Bougainvillean independence. It is believed to have produced a development plan for Bougainville, and to be willing to invest in a new port, tourism and agriculture, and in mining (Bohane, 2019). That coincides with the growing recognition of the need for mining to enable economic viability and of growing competition for mining rights. Immediately before the referendum, Sam Kaouna, a possible contender for the leadership of Bougainville, stated that he would seek a relationship with China if Australia did not make a good offer of support,

Bougainville is going to be open to both Australia and China. We are ready to start a new nation and we need their money... We have the resources, but we need their money (quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 2020, p. 9)

Kauona criticised Australia's wider engagement in the region, arguing that it showed "no respect to the people", while praising China for "bringing gifts". "This is the first holistic offer, which has come from China," he said. "Where is Australia and the U.S. and Japan? (McDonald, 2019b).

Australia's "Pacific step-up" through additional aid would counter China's growing influence in the region; but China's trade, investment and aid has grown at the same time as Australia's position on climate change has eroded the trust of Pacific island governments. Despite Australia's wish to exert a greater interest in the region, both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati have cut ties with Taiwan in favour of China. The Solomon Islands has received a wave of Chinese-backed investment proposals since September 2019, when it dropped its long-standing diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in favour of ties with Beijing. That suggests a model for Bougainville and a potential unwelcome challenge to Australia. Bougainville might easily make a similar choice. Indeed, Australia's role in the crisis, in support of the PNG government, is still viewed negatively by some in Bougainville. Australia's support for the blockade is remembered, while Sam Kauona has described BCL's support for the PNG military during the civil war as 'Australia's proxy war' (quoted in McDonald, 2019a, p. 57). Were China to establish an economic or even military presence in Bougainville, it would be the closest Chinese presence to the Australian mainland.

While Australia is most closely involved in Bougainville (with its only official PNG office outside Port Moresby located there, initially to the consternation of the PNG government), other regional states have a similar perspective. Indonesia is opposed to any fragmentation of PNG that offers even weak analogies with West Papua, at a time when violent repression of secessionist struggles is ongoing. There is no evidence that the Solomon Islands is in favour of a newly independent neighbour; that would raise questions about the Solomon Islands' own future. New Zealand has merely congratulated Bougainville and PNG on a successful referendum. Various uncertainties and shifting interests exist but none favourable to Bougainville. Ironically, neither a small new state appearing in the region, nor PNG refusing that independence, would be happy outcomes for Australia and other regional players.

The possibility remains for Bougainville again to make a unilateral declaration of independence should it not otherwise be granted (Bohane, 2019; McDonald, 2019). Less than three months after the referendum, when progress on negotiations was slow, the Central Bougainville MP in Port Moresby, Sam Akoitai, suggested that Bougainville might make a third unilateral declaration of independence although it was better to negotiate an independent future (*Post-Courier* February 2020). That might be recognised by some Pacific island states, or possibly by China which could be willing to provide financial support in exchange for access to mineral resources. Bougainville's misfortune may be that of lying close to Australia in complex and uncertain geopolitical times.

## Discussion

For half a century, Bougainvilleans have cherished the prospect of a separate destiny. These aspirations culminated in a predictably overwhelming vote for independence in the 2019 referendum. This hope has built on past and enduring perspectives, shaped around a sense of place, pride in distinctiveness, a desire for an autonomous choice and a vision of a viable future. Questions of status have centred on the right to self-determination and independence, and the recognition and advantages that such changes would bring. Despite a century of being linked to New Guinea and PNG, Bougainvilleans have never felt part of either.

A distinctive ethnic identity has been a key element in the pressure for secession and independence, in an ethno-nationalist struggle which traces legitimacy through history,

antipathy to alien colonialism (from different colonial and neo-colonial entities over different time periods), centred on the struggle for and claims to land (evident in the opening quotation) where land has symbolic, cultural and material value, for social structure, everyday practices and mineral resources. Far from Port Moresby, a distinct culture and history is written on and in the ground. As elsewhere, land tenure and land rights strengthen claims to legitimacy (Kelle, 2017) enhanced by the separation from and marginality to PNG that comes from islandness. Alienation of land for plantations and for the Panguna mine marks a shared colonial history, while civil war has enhanced local identity, PNG as the ‘Other’, and the morality and ‘justice’ of independence.

Nationalism emerged out of cultural and geographical distinctiveness, supported by Catholics rather than Protestants (Methodists) and by the south rather than the north. The near unanimous referendum results show that support for independence is now virtually ubiquitous. Nationalism, evident before independence and before mining, crystallised following Australia’s administration and company pressures to establish a mine in the centre of the island, contrary to the wishes of the local people. Given any semblance of choice, there was never a time when Bougainvilleans did not aspire to secession and independence and they have repeatedly fought and voted for it.

In the prosperity of the late 1970s and early 1980s, pressure for independence was briefly dormant; but it resurfaced with a version of the ‘resource curse’ and environmental degradation, relative deprivation and uneven development that exacerbated greed and grievances within and between groups, that closed the mine and precipitated civil warfare. In this century, the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement did not result in the PNG government showing Bougainvilleans the advantages of remaining with PNG, because of the inherent sense of difference and because promised finance and infrastructure were often delayed or absent. Even in the analogous circumstances of New Caledonia, France provided financial incentives and offered training over a similar time period, that had no evident effect on the outcome of a 2018 referendum on independence where the majority of the indigenous Melanesian population voted for independence (Connell, 2019). Immutable positions had been effectively shaped in the last century.

Ironically, nowhere in the Pacific, and especially in Melanesia, was support for independence so great prior to decolonisation. In Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG itself, there was often strong opposition. Bougainville is in a better position than most SIDS were at independence, having diverse resources for a relatively small island. However, states that have become independent since the 1970s have rarely followed a ‘standard’ colonial ‘model’, as in the Pacific, where colonial powers more or less voluntarily relinquished control of distant, ethnically distinctive territories. Since the 1990s, just three territories outside Europe have declared independence and gained international recognition: Eritrea in 1991, Timor Leste (East Timor) in 2002 and South Sudan in 2011. All had once been European colonies but gained independence by breaking away from successor states. They vary greatly, but all exhibit similarities in leaving post-colonial states initially reluctant to allow secession, and subsequently needing to rebuild shattered infrastructure and trust. That has proved difficult and their difficult post-independence trajectories offer concerns over the prospects for Bougainville sovereignty even with external goodwill (Connell and Aldrich, 2020).

#### **Four Problems for an Independent Bougainville**

Four problems constrain Bougainville’s movement to independence. Firstly, the very uncertain future of mining is critical to any political outcome. Bougainville may not be ‘ready’ for independence until the vexed future of the Panguna mine (and mining in general) is

resolved. Others argue that independence must come first. Any possibility of opening the mine, closed now for three decades, raises multiple questions about ownership, compensation, environmental change, growth and development, but above all over whether history might recur as tragedy. Large-scale mining offers the fastest and most feasible route to financial self-reliance. In itself, that strategy poses a policy conundrum for the ABG in the use of resource rents to reach fiscal self-reliance but subsequently achieve long-term broad-based growth (Chand, 2013). Behind such subtle economic issues are tensions and violence over landownership that have accompanied attempts to restore or extend mining, creating a volatile context even for exploration and prospecting. At the mine site itself, opposition has been particularly strong from a Me'ekamui now divided into different factions. The 'resource curse' is writ large in a small island where mining dominates the landscape and economy, precipitating violence and rendering it 'ungovernable' (Allen, 2013; 2018). Resolving the future of mining in Bougainville will be exceptionally difficult; yet, without it, the economic base would be weak, and even a resolution would not enable a mine to be profitable immediately or prevent a future 'curse'.

Secondly, Bougainville is not culturally homogeneous. Despite twenty distinct languages (and cultures) and Polynesian minorities on the atolls, many shared characteristics (such as matrilineal descent) do contribute to a distinct island identity. However, sub-regional differences have always existed and these were heightened during the crisis, particularly with the rise of the Resistance, which emphasised distinctions between Nasioi language speakers especially (at the mine site) and more coastal language groups. Other small-scale divisions occur in many places where reconciliation has not yet occurred to resolve the violence of the conflict years; so old allegiance and rivalries persist (Conciliation Resources, 2019). That offers a potential basis for, and a renewed threat of, social unrest.

Thirdly, there is no evidence that PNG would be willing to countenance the secession of a resource-rich province, which would provide a precedent for other provinces (some of which, especially the island provinces of New Britain and New Ireland, have previously stated an interest). PNG politicians have emphasised that it is the PNG parliament that must make the final decision, and it may refuse to ratify the referendum result. Delaying tactics were in place within weeks of the referendum. Most regional countries, notably Australia, are likely to support both delay and rejection, with Australia supporting a willing, complicit and compliant PNG.

Fourthly, for Bougainville to declare independence unilaterally would be almost impossible. Most external ties, notably trade, are through PNG and would require continued PNG goodwill. International law is largely silent on issues of secession other than where it concerns former colonial or non-self-governing territories; so, no legal guidance exists on the granting of recognition, even after a constitutionally and legally valid referendum. No requirement or need to support independence by other states, or to coordinate responses exists and, while abstract notions of justice and human rights matter, they have no practical consequences. As Coggins (2011) has pointed out, even winning independence in 'expected' places such as sub-Saharan Africa was a long-drawn out and occasionally violent and contested process, and as Timor Leste, Eritrea and South Sudan have shown, it is particularly difficult now. Indeed, in the analogous case of New Caledonia, external support for independence was substantially stronger in the last century than it is now. Not only is legal recognition important, but more practically, Bougainville is presently exceptionally dependent on external financial support; a unilateral declaration of independence would jeopardise such support. External ties with Australia and New Zealand – and with regional agencies, such as the Pacific Community

and the Forum Secretariat – would also be potentially forgone. Whether China would step into this substantial breach is a moot point.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the success of the referendum and subsequent euphoria, Bougainville is poised within a situation inherently fraught with uncertainties – economic, political and social – complicated by the recent history of divisive violence. It shares certain characteristics with newly independent Timor Leste – a badly damaged infrastructure, untested international political leadership, a recent history of extreme social disruption and a mineral resource base – but is much smaller in population (if not land area), has a higher life expectancy rate, no proliferation of aid donors and UN agencies, and no remittances. Unlike Timor Leste, it faces no potentially hostile neighbours; yet finds itself in a complex and critical geopolitical region that has attracted the interest of the great powers. The 1970s marked the last significant global phase of decolonisation. It was then that most Pacific territories, including PNG, became independent. Indeed, that may have been the ideal time for Bougainvillean independence, despite the various obstacles that existed. Almost five decades later, the time is less propitious; small island states have only rarely fared well since independence, and the times have moved away from decolonisation and self-reliance towards an increasingly global economy and society. Nearby New Caledonia has again rejected the possibility of independence, and seems likely to do so again in further referendums (Connell, 2019). Bougainville is swimming against a global tide where secession faces many challenges.

There is no denying a widespread Bougainvillean desire for a future of greater independence; but the island territory is no exotic, tropical paradise, with boundless resources and social harmony existing in a benign international environment. Bougainville exemplifies a model for resolving territorial conflict where autonomy is followed by a referendum on independence. However, as in New Caledonia, temporary stabilisation fails to alter irreconcilable territorial claims and so risks conflict relapse (Collin, 2019). That is particularly likely if the PNG government delays further and external recognition is absent, both of which are likely. Ultimately, Bougainville lacks ‘friends in high places’ (Coggins, 2011). An imagined smooth transition to a new regime and political community cannot transpire via a referendum alone. After the fading euphoria of the referendum result, the process of a peaceful transition to an early and orderly independence looks unusually bleak.

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