

Bougainville has voted to become a new country, but the journey to independence is not yet over

Written by Anna Powles, Senior Lecturer in Security Studies, Massey University

The Autonomous Region of Bougainville, a chain of islands that lie 959 kilometres northwest of Papua New Guinea's capital, Port Moresby, has voted unequivocally for independence.

The referendum saw 85% voter turnout during three weeks of voting, with [97.7%](#) of voters choosing independence from Papua New Guinea over the second option, which was remaining, but with greater autonomy from PNG. As the Bougainville Referendum Commission stated, the numbers told an important story, reflecting the support for independence across genders and age groups.

It's a momentous event, not only because it could a new country, but also because the referendum marks an important part of a [peace agreement](#) signed almost 20 years ago. The 2001 [Bougainville Peace Agreement](#) ended the [deeply divisive nine year conflict](#) (1988-1997) that lead to the deaths of approximately 20,000 people, or about 10% of Bougainville's population.

The referendum, however, is non-binding. The ultimate outcome will be determined by a vote in Papua New Guinea's National Parliament following negotiations between the Papua New Guinean government and the Autonomous Bougainville Government.

But as former President James Tanis said to me hours after the result was announced:

we survived the war, ended the war, delivered a successful referendum, what else can now stop us from becoming a successful independent nation?

China's interest in Bougainville

For the broader region, an independent Bougainville has a number of implications. Firstly, it sends a strong signal for other self-determination movements across the Pacific, including in New Caledonia which will hold a second referendum for independence in 2020.

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There are also geopolitical implications. The referendum has taken place during a period of heightened strategic anxiety among the Pacific's so-called traditional partners – Australia, New Zealand and the United States, as well as the United Kingdom, France and Japan.

There have long been concerns China will seek to curry influence with an independent Bougainville. As one Bougainvillean leader informed me, Chinese efforts to build relationships with Bougainville's political elite have increased over the past few years.

Beijing's interest in Bougainville is two-fold: first, it is seeking to shore up diplomatic support in the Pacific Islands region, thereby reducing support for Taiwan which lost a further two Pacific allies this year. And second, to access to resources, namely fisheries and extractive minerals.

Although it will be tempting for many in Canberra, Washington and Wellington to view an independent Bougainville through the current strategic prism – adhering to narratives about debt-trap diplomacy – doing so undermines the importance of local dynamics and the resilience of Bougainville people.

An independent Bougainville navigating a more disordered and disruptive international environment will need nuanced grounded advice, rather than speculation.

The road ahead for Bougainville will be challenging and it will need its friends – particularly New Zealand and Australia.

The much vaunted respective “Pacific Reset” and “[Pacific Step Up](#)” policies provide entry points for the kind of genuine engagement and support that Bougainville will require in the coming years.

Celebration with cautious anticipation

Following the result's announcement, Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape said his government had heard the voice of Bougainvilleans, and the two governments must now [develop a road map](#)

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that leads to lasting political settlement.

And Bougainville Referendum Commission chairman Bertie Ahern urged all sides to recognise the result and said the vote was about “your peace, your history, and your future” and reflected “the power of the pen over weapons”. Acknowledging the result is non-binding, Ahern said:

the referendum is one part of that ongoing journey.

And here lies the challenge. The post-referendum period was always going to be one of celebration, cautious anticipation and the management of expectations.

As one of Bougainville’s formidable women leaders told me, there are concerns about security in the post-referendum period as expectation turns to frustration if there are perceived delays in determining Bougainville’s future political status.

What’s more, the negotiations are likely to take a long time, since there’s no deadline they’re required to meet.

There are, however, critical milestones that still need to be hit first. This includes the Autonomous Bougainville Government elections, the first elections following the referendum, so will likely see intensified politicking as politicians jockey for a potential role in building an independent Bougainvillean state.

The Papua New Guinea’s national elections are also scheduled for 2022. The risk in both cases is that Bougainville’s future becomes a political pawn.

An independent Bougainville will face significant challenges and diverse choices.

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Not least of which is Bougainville's economic security and the choices that will need to be made about the Panguna Mine, the gold and copper mine at the heart of much of the conflict, and fisheries, once the new nation's 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone is created.

A young nation built on a past mired by the extremes of resource nationalism, Bougainville has difficult decisions to make about how it secures its economic self-reliance.

Anna Powles does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Anna Powles, Senior Lecturer in Security Studies, Massey University

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