

The Bougainville referendum: James Marape’s biggest challenge or biggest opportunity?

by [Kylie McKenna](#) · July 26, 2019



After weeks of political upheaval, Papua New Guinea (PNG) appointed James Marape as the nation’s eighth Prime Minister on 30 May 2019. The leadership change occurs at a pivotal moment in PNG’s history, coinciding with a referendum to decide on Bougainville’s future political status, set for 17 October 2019. The Bougainville referendum is a key milestone contained in a political settlement, the Bougainville Peace Agreement, which sought to reconcile a violent conflict from 1988–1997. Voters will be asked: Do you agree for Bougainville to have, (i) greater autonomy or (ii) independence? The outcome of the Bougainville referendum is subject to ratification of the PNG parliament, and although this may have been considered a win for the national government during the Bougainville peace negotiations, it now presents a twin dilemma for the new Marape Government to navigate. This blog reports on Prime Minister Marape’s early moves on the Bougainville referendum reported in the media, and Autonomous Bougainville President (ABG), John Momis’ response to the leadership change.

Some commentators have already dubbed the Bougainville referendum as Marape’s **biggest challenge**. Marape’s appointment followed what could have been a bizarre twist in the Bougainville–National Government relationship. Upon resigning from the position of Prime Minister, Peter O’Neill announced plans to hand over leadership to former Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan, whom was forced to resign in 1997 on the back of **a secret contract with private military consultancy**, Sandline, in a bid to suppress the Bougainville conflict.

Various dimensions of the Bougainville conflict, like the ‘Sandline affair’, remain a sensitive topic in PNG. Southern Highlands Governor William Powi, for example, argues that **matters relating to Bougainville are discussed too infrequently in the national parliament due to their sensitivity**. Reconciliation between the national government, and its armed entities, and the people of Bougainville, and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, is also incomplete. A national **ceremony planned for 15 June and another involving former combatants** were deferred as a result of the leadership change in Port Moresby. **The newly appointed PNG Minister of Bougainville Affairs, Sir Puka Temu**, argues that, ‘these ceremonies are vital to guarantee the security of the process and also reconcile and rebuild the relationship amongst all of us – our soldiers on this side and ex-combatants on the other side because that will then remove this cloud of suspicion’.

Although difficult to substantiate, there are expectations that **Bougainville will vote in favour of independence**. It has long been feared that an independent Bougainville would encourage other provinces, particularly resource-rich regions, to also push for separation and thereby threaten national unity. A decision to stand in the way of a Bougainville vote overwhelmingly in favour of independence, however, **could risk a reversion to conflict**. Yet if Marape were to concede Bougainville, **he will be marked down as the leader who ‘lost’ the island that was once PNG’s jewel**.

Early signs are that Marape will not relinquish Bougainville without effort. Upon being sworn in as Prime Minister, **Marape declared his preference that Bougainville stay within PNG**, while acknowledging the need to **respect the choices of the people of Bougainville as they have ‘gone through a lot’**. Marape has also responded with flexibility concerning the date of the referendum, following a **request of the Bougainville Referendum Commission for an extension of possibly six weeks** to ensure the **integrity of the electoral roll**.

Seizing on the opportunity to congratulate the new Prime Minister on his appointment, ABG President, John Momis, issued a press statement outlining four **key issues in need of urgent national government attention**.

The first issue relates to promised funding of PNGK20 million to the Bougainville Referendum Commission to prepare for and carry-out the referendum. Several days following the publication of Momis’ press statement, Acting Finance Minister, Richard Maru, **announced that the national government funds have now been released**.

The second matter concerns the regulations about the conduct of the referendum, which need to be made under the **Organic Law on Peace-building in Bougainville**. These rules relate, but are not limited to: eligibility; promotion of referendum; international observers; rolls of voters; enrolment; the polling. Momis argues that progress towards implementation of these rules, and other issues regarding the conduct of the referendum, are **well behind schedule**.

The third matter relates to funding of the ABG according to provisions contained in the Bougainville Peace Agreement, national Constitution and the Organic Law on Peace-building in Bougainville. Monies owing to the ABG by the National Government have been a particularly contentious issue in the Bougainville–PNG relationship in recent years, due to **delayed payments, miscalculations, and accounting errors**. Although the two governments agreed in 2017 to a repayment plan, **the ABG remains uncertain as to whether PNG will be in a financial position to deliver on its promise**.

The final matter highlighted by Momis concerns the next meeting of the Joint Supervisory Body (JSB) – a joint PNG-Bougainville institution that oversees the implementation of the Bougainville Peace Agreement. **The agreement with the Peter O’Neill government** was that the next JSB meeting would be held in early August in South Bougainville. **Momis has heavily criticised the national government in the past for deferring JSB meetings and for failing to respect the role of the JSB**.

A leadership change at the national level poses an additional challenge to the already complex task of preparing for, and conducting, the Bougainville referendum, as well as managing the post-referendum period. While the referendum may well represent Marape’s ‘biggest challenge’, it might also prove to be his biggest opportunity. That is, to revitalise the concept of the Bougainville Peace Agreement as a joint creation and to contribute to sustainable peace in Bougainville, regardless of the outcome.

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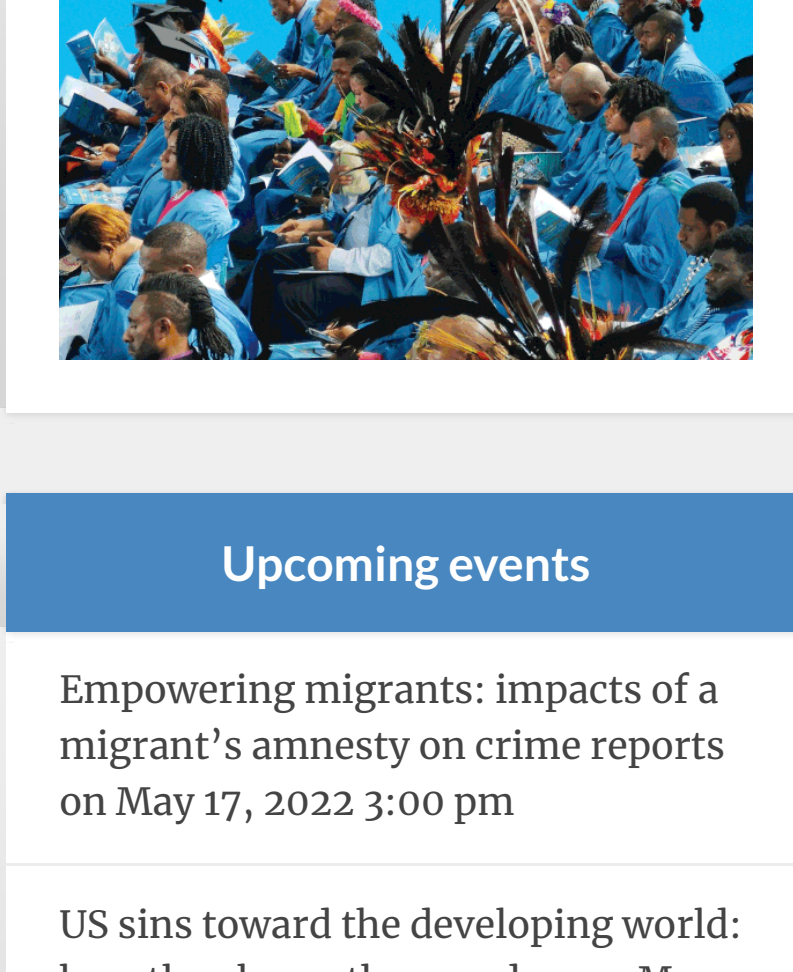
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Stalin Sawa
October 14, 2019 at 10:59 pm

Our fear is for another civil unrest, because this mark is history that will not be let gone. So, Bougainvilleans will not easily accept higher autonomy. Every new nation begins with a struggle, so give our people a chance to break away. How will the PNG Government serve Bougainville if it’s operating on huge deficit? Let Bougainville to have Independence and we sort out ourselves.

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Jason Kapram Pandum
August 27, 2019 at 10:43 pm

If Bougainville does gain independence, then who will be working in the economy and the private sectors? Who will be moving Bougainville’s economy? Where is the human resource, ladies and gentlemen? The supposedly productive age group of Bougainvilleans between 25–50 are illiterate because they grew up during the crisis and never went to school. Most of them even took part in the fighting. This group of people, especially men, are only contributing to social disorder in Bougainville. There’s no one to build Bougainville up as yet, ladies and gentlemen. If the ABG is serious about independence, they should build more schools, educate their children and allow this lost generation to pass out before they can gain independence from PNG. Otherwise, Bougainville will be another South Sudan. So for humanitarian sake, the Prime Minister of PNG must not let Bougainville go as yet. It is suicide if he does so!

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JK Domyal
July 30, 2019 at 10:36 am

Thanks Kylie for this piece – a thoughtful discussion point.

The simple question the new PNG PM should ask is this – Why did the initial uprising start in Bougainville? What was the reason Sam Kouana and Francis Ona started the uprising in the late 1980s?

The uprising started when most of us were still in primary school, even PM Marape was in high school at that time.

People like Somare, Momis and Paul Lapun were at the peak of their careers when the uprising started; an uprising that later turned into a crisis.

Now we are educated enough to understand the Bougainville issue, most of us believe the original reason was not for independence or greater autonomy, it was actually a fight against Rio Tinto, the developer of the Bougainville Copper mine for its unfair dealings with the local resource landowners.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Bougainville did stand up for segregation from the rest of PNG, but never started an actual war with the PNG authority.

The leaders of today in Bougainville, except Momis, did not understand the original reason for the 1980s uprising started by Sam Kouana and Francis Ona.

The leaders of today in Bougainville are concerned with the huge casualties faced and the valuable property destroyed during the crisis by PNG’s own Defence Force. The PNG government used its own army to cause mass destruction to the Island.

That is why the Bougainvilleans today reject the rest of PNG and want to stand on their own. Instead, the PNG government should have mediated between Rio Tinto and the landowners and resolved the crisis in the 1980s.

In Waigani, instead of critically looking at the reasons of the crisis, the government quickly proposed greater autonomy and a referendum on independence as options to win the hearts and minds of the Bougainvilleans.

What about Rio Tinto? Though, the mining giant left the island, the scar of destruction and casualties caused still vividly mesmerised the next generation of Bougainville.

Without addressing the original reason, we cannot find a lasting solution to the island.

If the call for greater autonomy or self-govern is granted to the Island; what could most likely trigger is opening floodgates for more autonomy in the Islands and Highlands of PNG, not just Bougainville.

The new PM ought to critically assess the Bougainville issue. His message of “take back PNG” includes integrating Bougainville island into one united PNG. He will be remembered for taking that bold stand.

PM JM could make unpopular and unconventional decisions like the US President to be harsh and upset other neighbours in the interim but worthwhile for the future of PNG.

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Michael Karupang
July 29, 2019 at 6:46 am

Bougainville’s struggle for Independence is not a new thing that was just popped in during 1989. It was our forefathers dream. It begun well before PNG gained its independence. Moreover it was brought by the blood of more than 20,000 of Bougainville’s heroes who sacrificed their lives during the bloody war in Bougainville. Therefore it is inappropriate for the other provinces to try to fit in the same shoes.

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John Braithwaite
July 27, 2019 at 10:36 am

Good article thank you Kylie. The peace agreement was sanctioned by the United Nations, so the UN and New Zealand would also lose credibility if the referendum result were ignored, and Australia would be viewed as untrustworthy yet again.

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Stephen Howes
July 29, 2019 at 10:12 pm

But what they all agreed to was a non-binding referendum.

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Kurumbi Wone
July 26, 2019 at 4:32 pm

The ordinary people of both PNG and Bougainville face the same fate under the corrupt tribal leaders and government officials in Papua New Guinea. The conflicts should not be between Bougainvillean and PNGnew ordinary people, it should be between the corrupt leaders and ordinary people.

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Ghandi Katoo
July 26, 2019 at 11:35 am

A very good article by Kylie. The onus is on the people of Bougainville to decide their fate.

But PNGans perception is for Bougainville to remain a part of us with greater autonomy. For this to happen and for lasting peace, here are four suggestions:

1. Compensation – as a Melanesian society it is culturally appropriate for the National Government to compensate the people of Bougainville for the destruction of properties and loss of lives on the Island as a result of the 10 year crisis. Every Bougainvillian family affected by this crisis either by loss of lives, injuries or destruction of properties must be compensated.
2. New Strategy for ABG’s funding commitments – the national government must come up with a new realistic funding strategy with realistic time frames to honour ABG commitments.
3. Awareness of the referendum and the two options – the parameters of the autonomy should be agreed by all parties. The people of Bougainville, both old and young, should be fully aware of the terms of the autonomy and independence to make a better decision to vote in the referendum.
4. Resource laws must be amended and must consider equal equity participation by investors and locals. This must be clear in the autonomy terms.

The actions of successive governments before and during the Bougainville crisis has now affected the political future of this country. If successive governments of PNG after this crisis do not learn from this terrible crisis and change PNG’s resources laws and clamp down on corruption, we stand to face a greater challenge in the future as indicated by the main article.

If in this referendum, the Marape–Steven Government can achieve the option of having greater autonomy for Bougainville to independence then it would be win-win for both parties, and a big win for PNG as a nation state.

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