

The Bougainville Political Referendum

Abstract: The Bougainville Political Referendum Analysis is an analysis on the referendum processes, progress and the challenges faced by Bougainvilleans within Bougainville, its state of economy, peace building efforts, weapons disposal plans and overall good governance and peace leading up to referendum vote on the 15th of June 2019. Churches obligation towards the peace process, weapons disposal and maintaining the peace before and after the referendum vote.

Methodology: Desktop research with information gathered online from different government websites, NGO websites, Media websites and relevant websites published articles, research papers, reports, legal documents, news articles and online encyclopaedias on Bougainville.

Aim: The aim of the research is to analyse the state of Bougainville, the process of referendum and how churches can help in the peace building process leading up to the referendum vote and after the vote.

Tool: Analysis

Introduction

The Autonomous region of Bougainville was formerly known as the North Solomons Province of Papua New Guinea. The Island was discovered and named after its discoverer the French explorer Louis de Bougainville in 1768¹. Bougainville at the time had one of the world's largest copper mine on the island, due to the lack of benefits/ non – payments of royalties from the copper mine coupled with the fear of environmental damages caused by the mine and detest of outside influence aggravated the land owners who formed a group (which later became known as the BRA) and forcefully shut down the copper mine and took control of the mining site. This fight for control over the mine and its proceeds turned into a struggle for freedom and self-determination after PNG sent in the PNG defense force to normalize the situation. After the war ended the region became an autonomous region of PNG subjected to the peace agreement signed by the Bougainville interim government and the PNG government in 2001. Over the last 17years since the signing of the Bougainville peace agreement, the peace processes have been ongoing. Partially but not fully achieved in terms of weapons disposal and the referendum process, referendum vote which will be held in June 15 of 2019. This paper will look at Bougainville's referendum processes thus far, analyse the possible outcomes of the referendum, analysing the indicators and the role of the church towards prevention of conflicts, peace keeping and security in the autonomous region.

The early signs or indicators of conflict

Throughout the worlds history we can see that in any given conflict there is intervention only after a conflict escalates, this is due to the lack of preventive measures and simply turning a blind eye on or ignoring the early warning signs and indicators of conflicts. When these early warning signs go unnoticed for so long it usually boils over causing a greater problem and in

¹ Augustyn et al (n.d), In *Encyclopedia Britannic*, Retrieved: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bougainville-Island>

this case the Bougainville civil war. In analysing these early signs it can be seen that Bougainvilleans have time and time again oppose outside influence and control. These intentions have consistently been made known throughout the short history of the island.

In 1889 Bougainville was separated from the Solomon Island by the German Niugini Company and Great Britain. Bougainvilleans were not happy with the separation and have made this known by objecting to this separation. As the biggest island in the Solomon Archipelago and being socially, culturally, geographically and ethnically linked to the Solomon Islands, Bougainvilleans did not see themselves as part of Papua New Guinea but one of the unique ethnicity in the Pacific.

In 1968 Elections were held throughout Papua New Guinea. Bougainville called for a referendum on secession, but the Papua New Guinea government ignored this request. Bougainville appealed to the United Nations, but was not successful.

In December 1975 Bougainville unilaterally declared its independence emphasising its wish to remain separate from the new state of Papua New Guinea.

The following year 1976 Bougainville signed an agreement to become an autonomous region, the Bougainville people challenged the signing of the agreement stating that the people who signed the agreement were not voted by the people of Bougainville.

In 1988 there was a tension when Bougainvilleans realised the money from the copper mine did not benefit them, royalties were not paid to land owners and the tailings from the mine polluted rivers causing environmental damages the tension than escalated into Violence and a struggle for self-determination.

In May 17, 1990 - Bougainville declared its independence officially for the second time, from PNG and established the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG)

The conflict that erupted due to the copper mine proceeds was the trigger that it needed to spark an outcry of the people to be heard internationally. When Bougainville declared independence after PNG put a blockade on the Islands, PNG defence force re-invade the island in 1991 leading to an almost 10 years of a bloody civil war resulting in over 20,000 deaths² from both sides. In 2001 Bougainville and Papua New Guinea signed the 2001

² RNZ (17 May 2018) *Bougainville remembers the dead from the civil war*. Retrieved: <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/357610/bougainville-remembers-the-dead-from-the-civil-war>

Bougainville Peace Agreement with an agreement for a three stage peace process. This peace agreement outlined these three stages as the three main pillars or principle agreements in the accord which are; Autonomy, Referendum and Weapons Disposal Plan.

Peace Process

The Referendum Process

Rules regulating the Bougainville Referendum are in four different legal documents: i) the Bougainville Peace Agreement, ii) the Constitution of Papua New Guinea, iii) the Bougainville Constitution, and iv) the Organic Law on Peace-Building in Bougainville - Autonomous Bougainville Government and the Bougainville Referendum

The Bougainville referendum process is set out in Division C of the Bougainville Peace agreement which states in summary:

The constitution of PNG must be amended to accommodate the rules regulating the Autonomy of Bougainville its government formation and the referendum process. This became one of Papua New Guinea's organic laws. In accordance with section 14 of the Constitution of Papua New Guinea the government made amendment No. 23 to the constitution which saw the inclusion of Part XIV of the National constitution which caters specifically for the Bougainville Government and the Bougainville Referendum. As a result of this constitutional amendment the PNG Government fulfilled the first six steps of the Bougainville referendum processes stated in the Bougainville peace agreement.

In May 2016 both Bougainville and PNG agreed in a joint meeting and set the targeted date for the referendum to be held on the 15th of June, 2019. In January 2017 the PNG and Bougainville government set up the Bougainville referendum commission, an independent body that will plan the vote for Bougainville's future. In October 2018 preparations to compile a voter roll started indicating two classifications to voting for the referendum:

1. Bougainville Residents - an eligible voter to be 18 years and live in a Bougainville district for more than six months

2. A Non – Bougainville resident that meets the criteria set out in the voter roll that is in the process of compiling.

This process is based on Section 315 of the peace agreement which states that: Eligibility to vote in the referendum will be the same as for national elections in Bougainville plus non-resident Bougainvilleans (detailed criteria to be finalised through consultation).

In October 1st 2018 according to section 316 of the peace agreement the Bougainville president and the Prime Minister of PNG agreed that only one question should be asked on the referendum. This process was delayed multiple times by PNG but was able to push through in October 2018. The one question asked was whether Bougainville should have a greater autonomy or be fully independent. The actual wording of the question is "Do you agree for Bougainville to have (i) Greater Autonomy or (ii) Independence?"

Section 316 of the peace agreement states:

- a. The question(s) to be asked in the referendum should be clear and agreed by the National Government and the autonomous Bougainville Government.
- b. The choices should be presented so as to facilitate a clear result.

After the question was agreed upon and revealed to the public in early October 2018, critics have been questioning the phrase “greater autonomy” as opposed to self-determination. Section 316 (a) states that the question asked should be clear ‘greater autonomy’ in this referendum question is yet to be defined by both governments in which renders the phrase ambiguous. When greater autonomy is used one can only assume whether Bougainville autonomous government will be given more autonomy, as in more national government power will be transferred to the autonomous government in dealing with its own state of affairs. Greater than the current powers the government have now, or another assumption would be whether Bougainville would opt for an economic independence but still remain an autonomous region of PNG. What ‘greater autonomy’ means for Bougainville and PNG is yet to be explained and for Bougainville it is important that the people understand and know what it means to be able to have a fair idea on the choices they will make come June 15th 2019. In saying that, this also questions whether the choices would facilitate a clear result as stated in Section 316 (b) of the peace agreement.

Therefore in this case there is a need for advocacy on the question, voter education and a given definition and explanation of the question by both the governments, so that Bougainvilleans can prepare well for the choices they would make when going to the poll in June 2019.

The first 8 referendum process ended with the referendum question and the compiling of the voter roll.... The next 12 processes will be dealt with when the referendum is being held on the 15th of June 2019.

Weapons Disposal

Weapons disposal is now being seriously looked at after the referendum date and question was set. It is one of the requirements for the referendum and is vital that Bougainville dispose of all weapons before the referendum date in order for the referendum vote to run smoothly without any disruption. After the civil war and as stated in the Bougainville Peace agreement the weapons disposal for the last 15 years was funded by the PNG government.

The Peace agreement stated that the weapons disposal plan will be carried out in stages, area by area around Bougainville beginning as soon as practicable. Therefore, when the amendments to the PNG constitution came into effect the PNG defence force and Police Mobile Unit were taken off the Island and weapons should have been confiscated and be locked up and secured in containers. According to the Bougainville Peace agreement, there should be two containers which have two separate locks and keys for securing these weapons. One of these keys is held by the United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville and the other by the relevant ex- combatant commander.

In January 2018 PNG government gave a sum of \$US 3.7million over a period of three years to run the project. In a joint meeting by the Bougainville and PNG government they agreed that they would seek technical and financial assistant to execute the weapons disposal project and also to remove all World War II remnants on the island, in doing so they will invite Countries with remnants on Bougainville to help³ in providing support with the remnants removal.

³ RNZ (8 January 2018), *\$US3.7 million for Bougainville weapons disposal*. Retrieved: <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/347654/us3-point-7-million-for-bougainville-weapons-disposal>

The weapons disposal is a vital part of the peace process because it will assure people that there will be a peaceful referendum vote or not. For the last 17 years there is no account of how many weapons exactly are out there in Bougainville and what to expect. The weapons disposal have been dragging on for so long it is now becoming the barrier for a referendum vote.

Rebel leaders in the civil war are coming forward with their weapons in showing their support for the referendum, Bougainvillians may have their differences but one of the things they all agree on is for a referendum and a possibility of self-determination. In May 2017 the leaders of the BRA came together in Arawa and signed a reconciliation after the date of the referendum was set. However there are still some particular group of people in Bougainville that is yet to surrender their weapons.

One of the National problems as described by the former ABG president and Bougainville Revolutionary Army Commander James Tanis is the self – proclaimed King Noah Musingku. Noah Musingku is described as a con man and fraud living freely in Bougainville under his alias name King David Pei II. Noah Musingku started a money scam which was known as the U-Vistract targeting educated Bougainvillians and large pentecostal churches in Port Moresby, he was caught and a warrant for his arrest is still active. He fled to the Solomon Islands in 2003, extracted money from the national government through deception and returned to Bougainville, where he worked with the secessionists Francis Ona, after the death of Francis Ona he declared his kingdom of Papala located in Siwai on South Bougainville and made himself king⁴. These days it is becoming a grave concern especially when Bougainville is in the process of achieving good governance and referendum. There is a concern over what the Autonomous region of Bougainville’s government is doing about this con man and the me’ekamui group⁵. It is a National problem, a church problem and a political problem for Bougainville and PNG.

The State of Development in Bougainville

Economic and social development

⁴ Cox (2014), *Fake Money, Bougainville Politics and International Scammers*, Australian National University In Brief, The State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) in the ANU College of Asia & the Pacific. Retrieved: http://bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2015-12/IB-2014-7-Cox-ONLINE_0.pdf

⁵ Post Courier (June 6, 2018), *Weapons Disposal Issues Confronting Bougainville: The Non- Disposal of Weapons in Bougainville may be the only obstacle in the 2019 Bougainville Referendum*. Retrieved: <https://postcourier.com.pg/weapons-disposal-issues-confronting-bougainville/>

According to the Bougainville Peace agreement Division B, Part 9 (e) states that:

Section 160 The autonomous Bougainville Government will receive an annual restoration and development grant no less than the 2001 Public Investment Programme (PIP) and adjusted upwards pro rata in accordance with the National PIP averaged over a rolling five year period.

Section 161 An agreed Bougainville-controlled mechanism, including both Bougainville and National Government representation, will be established to coordinate the restoration and development program in Bougainville.

Section 162 The National Government representation in that mechanism will be subject to review in the future review process.

Papua New Guinea in 2002 allocated a budget of 66 million kina for the recovery of Bougainville after the conflict. This budget saw the restoration of basic services such as education and health services. Bougainville after the conflict had to start over in terms of basic services such as education. For the people of Bougainville education is important in the building of the region to prepare for the possibility of self-determination, the children of the crisis as is referred to have missed out on formal education.

With the introduction of the PNG government's Tuition Fee Free Education (TFFE) many Bougainvilleans were able to go back to school, however lack of good infrastructure and teachers on the Island poses a question on the quality of education that is received. There are only 7 lower secondary schools and 4 upper secondary schools in all of Bougainville, before the implementation of the TFFE policy, around one-third of Bougainvillean school aged children were not in school, Bougainvillean primary students fall below the national averages in student performance for numeracy, literacy and writing⁶. In order for the region to progress in the future it needs a vibrant education system that produces vibrant and intelligent future leaders.

In telecommunication there are only 3 telecommunication service providers on the Island Telikom PNG, Digicel PNG and Bmobile/Vodafone. Digicel is the biggest telecommunication provider covering most of Bougainville while Telikom PNG and Bmobi/Vodafone are centralized only in Arawa, Buka and Nissan Island. In 2017 Digicel

⁶ Australian Artist Solidarity (September 29, 2017), *The State of Education in Bougainville*. Retrieved: <http://www.australianmaristsolidarity.net.au/state-education-bougainville/>

sent in its proposal to withdraw services in Bougainville⁷, however this turned out to be fake news and rumour which Digicel later condemned and refutes the false statement and in turn stated that they are proud to be the largest telecommunication provider and will continue to invest in Bougainville into the future. They have provided employment, ICT services, and direct and indirect business opportunities to a wide population on the island since investing in 2007⁸.

In 2014 the Aropa Airport in Kieta was opened after 24 years of closure a new and revamped airport with a new runway allowed for flights into the big island after 24 years. The autonomous region of Bougainville now has two airports one on Buka Island and the recently reopened Aropa Airport on the big island making it the only Province in PNG to have two big airports. This much needed service allowed for transportation and communication in and out of Bougainville.

In Health the Bougainville Governments mandate is to focus on Public Health, Health policy, planning and procurement, Community health services and Clinical health services⁹. In 2017 with the lack of National government promised funding on Bougainville, there was a shortage of medicine in health centres and lack of infrastructure forced the health services to be cut. The Bougainville government blamed the national government saying it was a deliberate act by the PNG government to influence the outcome of the referendum in 2019¹⁰.

The comment was made following the PNG governments lack of commitment to the funding of development projects in Bougainville. In a statement to Post Courier in 2017, Mr Osioco a member of Kokoda stated that Bougainville is running on a K360 million budget. From internal tax collection the government of Bougainville makes about K20 million which is inadequate to carry out development projects. The PNG government is obligated to fund these development projects until the AROB government is financially stable enough to do it

⁷ Hakalits (July 17, 2017), *Proposal By Digicel To Withdraw From Bougainville Concerns Government*. Retrieved: <http://www.pireport.org/articles/2017/07/17/proposal-digicel-withdraw-bougainville-concerns-government>

⁸ Loop Business (July 21, 2017), *Digicel Condemns Withdrawal Rumors*. Retrieved: <http://www.looppng.com/business/digicel-condemns-withdrawal-rumours-63350>

⁹ Department of Health (n.d), *Autonomous Bougainville Government Website*. Retrieved: <http://www.abg.gov.pg/government/departments/health>

¹⁰ RNZ (May 29, 2017), *Lack of funds hit health services in Bougainville*. Radio New Zealand Website. Retrieved: <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/331844/lack-of-funds-hit-health-services-in-bougainville>

on its own. Currently the PNG government owes Bougainville K960 million in outstanding grants¹¹.

Therefore the Infrastructure developments have been slow and the economic activities limited causing much frustration on the island.

Churches on Bougainville

After the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2001, the UN set up offices on the island to help with the peace process especially in initiating weapons disposal and putting down of arms. The UN used multiple approaches and worked with many different groups and stake holders. However after assessing the lack of commitment and stand on peace and weapons disposal, it started utilizing the church in ceasefire projects between the factions on the island, and started negotiating reconciliation and weapons containment¹².

During the crisis churches were involve in peace building and helped in reducing violence, there were many challenges faced and in some occasions denominations were divided when some church leaders started taking sides. However the division between churches on the island have been overcome with churches collaborating in the peace process and working together in encouraging weapons disposal and peacebuilding¹³.

In mid-2018 an initiative by the PNG council of churches and with the support of the UNWomen brought PNGCC church leaders, church leaders from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Government entities, civil society organisations, women leaders and development partners all together to discuss cross-sectoral partnerships in addressing conflict prevention. They also explore possibilities in continuing raise awareness on the upcoming referendum in Bougainville as a unified group¹⁴.

Initiatives and Challenges

¹¹ Makis (October 12, 2017), *Bougainville operating on a Budget of K360 million*, Post Courier Online. Retrieved: <https://postcourier.com.pg/abg-operating-annual-budget-k360-million/>

¹² UNDP PNG (n.d), *Peace Building in Bougainville*. Retrieved: http://www.pg.undp.org/content/papua_new_guinea/en/home/ourwork/crisispreventionandrecovery/successstories/peace-building-in-abg.html

¹³ UNDP (2014), *Peace and Development analysis: Findings & Emerging priorities*, pg 6. Retrieved: https://www.ipat-interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/016UNDP_PDA_FINAL_Spreads.pdf

¹⁴ UNPNG (2018), *Churches to play vital role in peace building and conflict prevention*. Retrieved: http://pg.one.un.org/content/unct/papua_new_guinea/en/home/press/news-articles/churches-to-play-vital-role-in-peace-building-and-conflict-preve.html

The churches have been involved in peacebuilding on the Island before, during and after the war. In their experience on the ground they have been part of a collaborative effort with institutions on the ground in initiating and conducting peacebuilding advocacy and counselling.

One of the initiatives the church was involved in with some civil society organizations is trying to address trauma after the war. This initiative unfortunately had little recognition and support given by the people due to trust issues in maintaining confidentiality which made Bougainvilleans unwilling to collaborate and share their mental state of mind. This was a great initiative which was never given the chance to be explored more. Therefore it is suggested that the approaches to this initiative needed deeper inquiry and research in understanding the mindset of people in developing a more effective but workable approach in helping the healing and peace process for Bougainvilleans¹⁵.

For the referendum process it is vital that the churches assess the situation on the ground to get a better idea of what is the current state of Bougainville and how can churches contribute to ensuring that there is peace leading up to the referendum vote and also after the vote regardless of the outcome.

In August 2018 after the organized workshop on achieving peace by peaceful means in Goroka in the Eastern Highlands Province of PNG, the PCC leaders went on a four day trip to Bougainville to get a better understanding of how they can help in maintaining the peace in the region, mapping out and linking peace building in the churches throughout Bougainville. It also will help them in preparing an action plan to support the upcoming referendum, creating a series of ‘learning networks’, to allow PNGCC to further support reliable peace building efforts across Bougainville and the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. This fact-finding mission also included the UN Women’s assistance, and government, civil society and research organizations¹⁶.

On this mission the Churches were able to have open dialogues throughout the visit with ABG President Dr John Momis and members of the Bougainville Executive Council, Deputy Chief Secretary for Policy and Planning with the Autonomous Bougainville Government, departmental heads from Community Government and Community Development, and with

¹⁵ UNDP (2014)

¹⁶ Turner (September 27, 2018), *Church leaders visit Bougainville to see how they can help prevent conflict*, UN Women: Asia and the Pacific. Retrieved: <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2018/10/church-leaders-visit-bougainville>

the development partners and civil society organisations working in the Autonomous Region. During the Bougainville conflict Churches were active in the provision of services, by recognising these past contributions, and assessing the current needs. It is evident that the various Christian denominations have a role to play in the wider peace building space¹⁷.

Conclusion

In the coming referendum vote on 15th of June 2019, the church will be one of the key institutions in keeping the peace throughout the voting period, however it will have to start now in ensuring that the weapons disposal plan is achieved before the referendum date by negotiating with factions that are holding back on weapons disposal, plan and draw up effective approaches towards peacebuilding. Providing an avenue for peaceful dialogue between the people and the governments both the Papua New Guinea and Bougainville Government, providing and creating safe space for dialogue among Bougainvilleans themselves, provide counselling and peacebuilding workshops and most importantly ensuring the spiritual needs of the people is taken care of in order to prepare them well for whatever the outcome maybe for the referendum vote.

¹⁷ PostCourier Online (August 29, 2018), *Churches fact finding mission to Bougainville a success*. Post Courier. Retrieved: <https://postcourier.com.pg/churches-fact-finding-mission-bougainville-success/>

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