

NATION #194?: ON BOUGAINVILLE

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With [Bougainville's overwhelming vote for independence](#) from Papua New Guinea (PNG), the country has crossed a milestone in the peace process following the civil war that ended in 1998. The non-binding referendum, to ascertain a preference for either greater autonomy or separate statehood, was a promise enshrined in the 2001 Bougainville Peace agreement. In a province of fewer than 3,00,000, the voting process spanning two weeks underscored the challenges facing the regional administration in Buka and that in the national capital of Port Moresby. The Bougainville Referendum Commission undertook the commendable task of enlisting inmates in hospitals and prisons and non-residents to ensure that the conduct of the franchise was inclusive. A testament of the participation was the 85% turnout in the plebiscite. With 98% opting to secede, the people spoke emphatically at the end of an animated campaign.

The demand for separate statehood in Bougainville dates back almost to PNG's independence in 1975. This sentiment was further crystallised by the conflict over the open cast copper mine in Panguna town — among the world's largest and richest — whose revenues accounted for over 45% of the country's export earnings. In the confrontation that centred around sharing the mineral resources, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was pitted against the PNG security forces for a decade. An estimated 20,000 lives were lost and many were displaced. Enforcing the Bougainville verdict is bound to be protracted, characteristic of the political and administrative processes of carving out the boundaries of a new state. Foremost, in an attempt to give shape to the decision, Port Moresby and Buka will engage in negotiations. Any agreement would have to be ratified by the country's Parliament. Significantly, the Central government had hoped that the region would vote to remain rather than secede, whereas among Bougainvillians and observers, the choice for separation was a foregone conclusion. In a sign of the future shape of events, the PNG Minister responsible for Bougainville recently expressed concern that Buka could set a precedent for any other breakaway movement. There are, moreover, issues around the economic viability of the tiny island group. The controversy over the Panguna mine still lingers, as the company that once controlled operations is vying for restoration of its licence. The Bougainville government, which last year clamped an indefinite moratorium on the mine's reopening, would inevitably have to revisit that decision sooner rather than later. But the advent of the world's 194th nation may be some distance in the future.

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