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Abstract

The proposal for Bougainvilleans to vote on the relationship between Papua New Guinea and Bougainville, even up to the point of separation into two nations, is a matter of concern to everyone presently calling himself or herself Papua New Guinean. It sounds like a divorce in the relationship. How will Bougainville find its voice in this issue? Are there clear grounds leading to unequivocal decisions? Are there aspects of the decision-making process which are unusual and which need caution as voting approaches? The role of matrilineality is not unique to the Bougainvillean situation, but it is unusual for the great majority of PNG. The fact that women run their domestic economy and yet are absent on the Regional scene needs highlighting. The sensitivity of the many groups in the Region to their differences is also an issue. Cultural aspects such as skin colour might become prominent in some discussions, but sometimes they should be taken as pointing to other divisions in society. This paper relies on the experience of the writers in national elections in PNG where all too often the perception is that voters want to be bribed rather than grapple with the larger perspectives of development in which all can share a vision.

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ISSUES POTENTIALLY EMANATING FROM THE VOTING IN THE BOUGAINVILLE REFERENDUM

By Leonie Baptiste, Bernard Yegiora, Waka Tosa, Patrick Gesch, Maretta KulaSemos, Calista Hamadi, Gordian Kuias, Loretta Hasu

Introduction

This paper is a response to an invitation by the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute (PNG NRI) to contribute to the discussion of the Bougainville Referendum; “The PNG National Research Institute’s Bougainville Referendum Research Project (BRRP) invites the Papua New Guinean academic community to contribute to the discussions on the ‘Implementation of the Bougainville Peace Agreement’ and the ‘Implications for the Bougainville Referendum’”. (Invitation to PNG Academics. Topic 1: Referendum and Referendum Administration Related Issues. NRI: November 2018). In this the possibility of national independence is being raised, as a step going beyond “greater autonomy”. This choice is to be presented even while some Bougainvilleans in PNG wonder about the possibility of the “status quo” or even “let us start again please” – as it was before the crisis. Such a step has prompted PNG NRI to ask knowledgeable experts from other corners of the globe to address the issue in a comparative way. NRI has commissioned a paper by Andrew Ellis, who “draws on experiences of administration from recent referendums on independence and sovereignty, looking at Quebec, East Timor, Montenegro, South Sudan, the Falkland Islands, Scotland, Catalonia and Iraqi Kurdistan.” (See: About the Referendum Administration Issues Study, 2018. NRI: Port Moresby). A paper was also commissioned from Professor Matt Qvortrup, who is considered the “world’s leading expert on referendums” (see: About the Referendum Case Study, 2018. NRI: Port Moresby.) This wide-ranging consultation emphasises the fact that the Referendum is going ahead with the people’s eyes wide open.

Methods

The invitation was extended to interested parties to contribute papers on perspectives on the Bougainville Referendum, which is now due to take place starting 12 October 2019 and to run for 14 days. A number of papers on the larger perspectives on referendums were produced for the PNG National Research Institute (PNG NRI) — (Bell & McVeigh, 2018; Chand, 2018; Ellis, 2018; Kössler, Palermo & Woelk, 2018; Marks, 2018; Qvortrup, 2018). Although these deal with very concrete issues at times, we, members of the Department of PNG Studies and International Relations at Divine Word University have felt that we could contribute something more on the grassroots issues which might emanate from the Referendum. We do this from our own experience of living as academics in PNG; from our field work visits to Bougainville; from the intimate family experience of living with Bougainvilleans; from interviews with Bougainvilleans living in other parts of PNG; and from our participation as Election Observers in the PNG Elections over the last three national elections. We also draw on the resources of the late Dr Jerry Semos, who as a Bougainvillean was Head of our Department and collected materials of interest for our work. All of these connections make us very interested in the political future of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, and we are also pleased to draw on the unpublished academic research of our Bougainvillean students, especially Liza Kabui (2018) and Shallum Tabea (2018), for whom the research was of no casual interest. What do the people of Bougainville want? Can they achieve it with their resources? Will the results of the Referendum bring healing to the crisis and the peace for the Region that is aimed at?

Our discussion on the Voting covers: 1) women voters under the matrilineal aspect of identity as *mamagraun* in Bougainville; 2) The importance of the weapons disposal before voting, in the view of many outsiders; 3) The colour profiling issue of identity; 4) The vagaries experienced in the Voting Process in PNG; and 5) Raising the matter of regaining trust throughout the province both before and after the Referendum vote.

Matrilineality and identity through the land

Many, but not all, parts of Bougainville are matrilineal, in that women own the land. So kinship, inheritance and rights to use land are passed down through women. (Saovana-Spriggs 2007, Pearson 2010, Garasu 2013). Bougainville women are often referred to as *mamagraun* — ‘mothers of the land’. However, matrilineal identity through the land does not necessarily guarantee that women will have more say or have the deciding voice in all formal matters relating to land, and any political decision making involving how people will make a living from the land. Tradition dictated that women’s views be expressed through a male in the family or clan, a practice that has now found its place in formal decision making. Whilst traditionally, Bougainville women are the *mamagraun*, exerting their matrilineal rights in the village/ clan or local context, that is as far as they can go in terms of exercising their land and identity rights. This in part is largely due to cultural expectations associated with the division of labour. Unlike the men who can cross boundaries to negotiate and form alliances outside of their clans and lineage, women’s roles are restricted to their clans. As Semos (1997), highlights, “... the dominant division of labour role of men in resource allocation and distribution conceals or underestimates the significance of the latent power and authority of the mother/ woman in mobilising or networking with other dominant clan mothers” (p. 178). Regan (2018) also observes that the “... tendency to patriarchy in Bougainville’s matrilineal societies seems to extend to most spheres of human activity” (p. 13). Thus cultural limitations can have a bearing on how women in matrilineal Bougainville are perceived, hence the imposed limitations in decision making as would be expected in modern day politics that requires networking and building coalition.

Bougainville women are still represented by their male relatives as clan spokespersons when engaging in formal political decision making. Garasu (2013) recaps, “Despite having roles and responsibilities in Bougainvillean culture, women have struggled to participate directly in the formal political peace process which has been dominated by men.” This does have implications for the participation of women in the upcoming referendum.

The role of women in the Bougainville referendum

The Bougainville Referendum Commission (BRC) was created on 24 January, 2017. BRC’s primary purpose is to build local ownership of credible, inclusive electoral processes. The BRC comprises seven members, one of whom is a Bougainvillean woman, Ruby Miringka (Chief Referendum Officer, 2019).

The position of women in high ranking groups such as the BRC should not only take place because it ticks the criterion of having a woman ‘on board’, but it should also hold some significance in the fact that she will speak for and on behalf of the women of Bougainville, and that she will provide a voice for the women at that high-ranking level. It gives relief to a lot of women that they have a voice and that they are contributing towards decision-making through their woman representative. This is supported by Julie Bukikun, UNDP assistant resident representative who stated that “women have a huge role to play in regard to the referendum process.” (United Nations Development Program, 2017).

Although most women are seen to be leaders in the matrilineal areas of Bougainville, there are day-to-day challenges that they face. In view of their minor economic participation especially in non-feminised areas, women are still seen as being ‘weak’. In Bougainville, there is a “long standing view that cocoa production is a man’s world.” (George, 2018)

The decision on who to vote for or what to vote for begins at home

The decision on who votes for whom or, in the case of the Referendum, ‘who votes for what’ begins at home. An experience in the recent PNG national elections had one woman say that her vote was based on her husband’s vote. They had discussed this for a while and confirmed this again just before she came down (from the mountains) to cast her vote. They confirmed that they would both vote for the same person. She said she followed her husband because he is the leader of her family. The question of voting for whom or for what is a family matter and especially for the Bougainville Referendum, where it is a matter that has become part and parcel of the lives of most people on Bougainville because like with the national elections, their future lies with the ballot paper and whom they vote for or what they vote for is of paramount importance.

If women are not equally represented in the Parliament of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, their rights as landowners and custodians of kinship, inheritance and the sustainability of Bougainville in the future may be under-represented. Women’s participation as voters and candidates is critical to the upcoming referendum. We use an example from the 2015 Bougainville elections to illustrate the struggles and barriers faced by women, which, if not addressed, could have implications for women voters in Bougainville.

Women in the 2015 Election

Baker’s recent reviews of the electoral successes of women

(Baker & Oppermann 2015; Baker 2015) in the 2015 AROB election makes the position of women as voters and as candidates a matter of considerable concern. According to Baker (2015), the 2015 elections attracted the largest number of women candidates, 35 of them, comprising 12 who contested for the open seats and 23 who contested for the three regional seats reserved for women, which do cost more in campaigning. Only Josephine Getsi of the Peit electorate in North Bougainville was victorious in the “single member” or open constituencies. Although most of the women had received candidate training through Bougainville Women’s Federation (BWF) and international organisations (Baker, 2015), challenges were experienced during the actual campaign process, involving logistics and management of resources to sustain their campaigns. There was also the objection that “Women are for the kitchens only, not for the parliament” (Baker & Oppermann, 2015, p. 2). In fact, there is a requirement mandated in the Constitution that there must be at least one woman in cabinet.

Specifically, challenges included not having the financial means or adequate funding to stage successful campaigns, let alone to sustain their plans; not having the full support of groups or teams well versed in formal political campaign strategies; or for those who were able to secure teams (referred to as *komitis*), having to sustain and maintain these *komitis* proved to be a challenge. Family obligations and responsibilities were added pressures whilst on campaign trails. For some, having a male relative contesting the same seat meant the female had to contest a different seat rather than compete with their male relative. For some, having a husband was an economic determinant. For others, those husbands were not so helpful. Getsi had the support of the New Bougainville Party of re-elected President, John Momis.

The 2015 election results reaffirm the barriers that women, not just in Bougainville, but generally in PNG and Melanesia, still face in modern times. Even though Bougainville women may be landowners, they remain voiceless when it comes to participating in decision making. This poses the question of how much influence and say women can have on the upcoming referendum. Will Bougainville women be able to vote independently as they remain voiceless in the ABG Parliament? Will Bougainville women be able to vote independently without “assistance” and influence from their male relatives, scrutineers and interpreters, given that they are mostly represented by men in the public forum?

Women in Bougainville are often described as the peace makers. It was the women who prayed, marched and

negotiated for peace and reconciliation (Garasu, 2013). They also appealed and supported the international call for weapons to be disposed of, as expressed by the Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency:

These weapons cannot remain in our community. These weapons caused the deaths and injuries of our men, women and children. They raped our mothers, daughters and sisters. They created widows and orphans, destroyed our homes, crops and businesses. They are our fear of the past, not the hope of our future... There is no such thing as safe containment. Containers have been broken into, that is a fact.... We cannot build a democratic and free Bougainville if there are containers of weapons with guns next to our polling booths.... Prove to the people of Bougainville that you have learned from the hard lessons of the crisis. (Press release of November 2003 cited in UNIFEM 2003)

UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) conducted a site visit in 2003 and interviewed women actively engaged in the peace process and the post conflict reconstruction efforts. Their questions were focused on the impacts of the three processes: Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration – referred to as DDR. Except for Nissan Island where two women were included in the discussions, generally, most women were excluded by men from the fighting parties in discussion, with the reason given that women would be in favour of weapons destruction (UNIFEM, 2003), as cited below:

All actors – the warring parties, the United Nations, donor agencies and NGOs – credit women for sparking and sustaining the cease-fire and peace process. This widespread recognition of women’s role in creating and sustaining the conditions for peace stands in stark contrast to the absence and exclusion of women from the complex three stage disarmament and weapons disposal plan, which is intricately linked to progress on political and constitutional issues in the Bougainville Peace Agreement, finalized in August 2001. (UNIFEM, 2003)

In light of the discussion so far, it may be argued that the question of matrilineality and identity through the land does not guarantee Bougainville women a safe and smooth single private vote in the upcoming referendum if they remain voiceless and excluded from the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

Weapons disposal and unfinished reconciliations

In this second section, we report on the strength of feelings by Bougainvilleans living outside the AROB that the element of force must be absent well before the election. This is part of the great need for reconciliation, which began with the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA), but which was not completed in all the communities in which resentment and scarred memories remain. Nisira (2017) sees that guns are not being handed in because of the commercial value they have for trade in the Highlands of PNG, because of the use of these weapons for criminal purposes, but most seriously, because there is lack of trust that the other side will abide by the desire for peace.

Women in the surrender of weapons

There was a recent event, reported in the newspapers with moving photographs, where Peit constituency was led by the women to hand over guns, at this time (Hakalits 2019). This is apparently the strength of matrilineality, that they should take the lead in reconciliation. The fact that Peit was the constituency of the only elected woman member of the Bougainville Assembly, Josephine Getsi, is surely not just a coincidence, given also that Getsi characterises her electorate as the “most corrupt constituency” (Baker & Oppermann 2015, p. 2).

The peace agreement contained a plan for the Bougainville Revolution Army (BRA), Bougainville Revolution Front (BRF) and the Me’ekemui groups to disarm. Many people did not disarm but instead retained their weapons for various reasons. Some weapons were disposed of under the United Nations (UN) supervision resulting in the destruction of about 2,000 weapons. (Nisira 2017)

During a peace and conflict assessment research visit funded by the United Nations Development Programme on Bougainville in 2011, one of the present writers, Kuias, went with late Dr Jerry Semos. He travelled around the Island of Buka and also went to Arawa. He was told during his interviews that many weapons will not be disposed of because of the mistrust and fear that existed between many different faction groupings.

Different factions

There existed mistrust between several factions on Bougainville such as the BRA, BRF and Me’ekemui groups. There is also fear of the outside groups like the PNG Defence Force. During his interviews Kuias was told that it would

be difficult to really dispose of all the weapons. Some would be destroyed but others would remain in the house for the family and village protection. He was given a room to have a rest while in Arawa and found the room provided with a gun against the wall and another on the ceiling. He was told that those were provided in 2011 just in case a need for defense might arise. The other important thing to keep in mind are the sources of the weapons. What are the sources of Bougainville weapons? Where did Bougainvilleans get their weapons?

Production of weapons

There are several sources where Bougainvilleans collected their weapons. Some weapons were imported from Solomon Islands and some from PNG through Nissan Island. Other weapons were collected from the PNG Defense Force during the crisis period. Most of the weapons on Bougainville are local products. Bougainvilleans have devised small factories and produce guns using the local materials, in the same way that the hillside of Arawa is covered with small hydro-electric powered lights, manufactured from reverse engineered car dynamos.

In the Bougainville movie talking about the crisis, *Bougainville: It's in our hands* (Frontyard Films 2000), you see how some Bougainvilleans express their gratitude for managing to survive during the crisis period. In fact a woman in the movie says that during the civil war, there were opportunities like in a university that developed a situation for them to discover and become creative. The people were able to look for alternative ways to help themselves. Paru Paru in the hills behind Arawa was largely a self-run adult education facility during and after the crisis, as Gesch witnessed in 2000.

With regard to the weapons, combatants started off with all kinds of weapons like bows and arrows, then finally started to build their own guns using the material that was available in the villages. They built workshops and made homemade guns. Most of their guns are local products using materials found locally. Most Bougainville-made guns had a label written on the barrel of the gun “Made in Me’ekemui” – which means – “Made in The Holy Land”. This raises one important question for the weapons disposal process. They can destroy many or all the weapons but how about the production factories? What guarantee is there that after destroying the weapons they will not produce some more? What should they do with the gun workshops or factories?

Colour profile of voters

In our third section here, we consider the role of colour

profiling on voting. Anthony Regan refers to the great variety of identities assumed by people in AROB. There are the modern allegiances to church, to the ways of being educated in the Western system, to financial differences. But there are the many traditional differences which exist: “Identity is a complex, ‘slippery’ and anyway multiple concept, given the number of overlapping categories which individuals may use to identify themselves, or which they may use to identify others — socially, culturally, and ethnically. Social identities may include gender, age, family, economic role and kin. A variety of cultural characteristics may be used to distinguish one cultural group from another. Ethnic markers include language, race, religion and colour.” (Regan 2015, p. 418f.) There are also differences in accent, shape of the nose and migration histories, besides the colour of the skin. Not all of these differences can be granted legitimacy, such as the common attribution from outside that “Buka” from such a place as Buin are the finest people. “Superiority of the Buka was then extended to all Bougainvilleans when they were dealing with the mainly lighter skin coloured people from other parts of New Guinea.” (Regan 2015, p. 437)

One of the present writers was visiting Arawa for a review of the work of the Catholic social welfare organisation, Caritas, in 2000. A Sepik man working with him was seated in the back of the Land Cruiser as it slowed down to cross a creek. BRA Commander David appeared from the side of the road and swung a screwdriver at the Sepik saying, “You, redskin! What are you doing here?” Although we can be confident that Commander David would not have missed his aim if he did not want to do so, the effect was sufficiently terrifying for the exposed Sepik. The term “redskin” appears often in antagonistic contexts in the short stories of Leonard Fong Roka and in his journal, *Brokenville* (2014).

This profiling surely becomes an issue when it comes to who can vote in the Referendum. Our Bougainville interviewees in Madang said that they definitely expected their wives to be able to vote, and also their adult children. These dependants expect to go to Bougainville some time in the future, and to be able to take up traditional residence even though they will live on Java River above Panguna, home of their late relative, Francis Ona. The Bougainvilleans of Madang are now working to get their names on the common roll for voting, since this has been made parallel to the national voting registration of PNG. And it should include the names of intimate family who know only Madang. Other wives of Bougainvilleans, coming from other provinces of PNG, bear witness that they suffer from a deep sense of prejudice, as “his red skinned wife”, to the extent that they

feel deprived of a voice in family matters, and are treated as people of no account because they are not *mamagraun*. In fact, Bougainvillean women who are educated are found to be more censorious of outsiders, whatever the comparative educational experience might be.

Although Regan (2015) takes pains to point out that any kind of difference can be taken up and exploited as a sign of superiority or advantage, and that this is a characteristic of all peoples, there seems a higher sensibility about the issue of “red” and “black” in this context of the Referendum (Nash & Ogan, 1990). The red and the black of the PNG flag was taken as a declaration of the separation of peoples in PNG by the people of Bougainville. Nash & Ogan report: “The potency of the color symbolism can be seen in connection with the Papua New Guinea flag. As soon as the design was publicised, Nasioi and Nagovisi noted that the upper half of the flag was to be red, the lower half, black. Discussion in the villages maintained that this design was meant to announce the continued domination of “redskins” over Bougainvilleans in an independent Papua New Guinea . . . Navitu supporters in 1972 planned a demonstration at which the national flag was to be pulled down from the Kieta Council chamber.” (1990, p. 9) It should be reported, though, that even in East Sepik Province, the black and red took on a similar negative connotation in 1972, where the school children of Yangoru insisted that the black triangle must go to the top, with the red triangle going underneath. This was a reference to the fact that Independence would mean the triumph of black people (such as the Sepiks) over the white people who were the former rulers. The school children kept raising the flag upside down every day until heavy handed direction by the white head teacher became necessary.

Friedlander (2015) confirms with his physical anthropology studies that red and black are measurable very precisely in skin colour. “The DermaSpectrometer measures the primary colour-giving elements of the skin, hemoglobin (red) and melanin (brown). The reflectance of narrow-band light in the red spectrum results in an estimate of the melanin content of an individual’s skin.” (2015, p. 70, fn.1)

While it strikes the visitor as very odd that the Tasmans and the Mortlocks sit around Buka as native to the place, despite looking like Papuans come as tourists for the day, there is a sensitivity to skin colour in a variety of forms: “the Torau acknowledge that they are of a slightly lighter skin colour than members of the Telei (Buin) and Nasioi language groups, but see that as involving desirable qualities. In the Torau language these are described as *tala tala* (shiny) and *uniari*

(not too black and not too light — or ‘red’, a skin colour seen as undesirable).” (Regan 2015, p. 434.) It can be hoped that, as for all of PNG, the sheer fact of a great multiplicity of choices about who might be your enemy, means that there is no reason to focus on one division as the only enemy. In a survey carried out amongst Bougainvillean students by T. K. Moulik in 1977, he reported that “For the students, the ‘two most conspicuous and repeated characteristics in the sense of cultural identity in contrast to other . . . groups were the skin color and peaceful nature of the Bougainvilleans.” (In Nash & Ogan 1990, p. 11) We can take this profession seriously and now turn to the voting process itself.

Stages in the voting process

We will now turn to the voting process as we know it in Papua New Guinea, and take some care to provide for likely scenarios during the voting process of the Referendum.

Setting up the vote

On 18 January 2019 we viewed a document labelled “2019 Bougainville Referendum Ballot Paper”. This began with a Preamble: “The outcome of the referendum on the future political status of Bougainville will be discussed by both governments (the GoPNG and ABG), and will be presented to the national parliament for final decision making in accordance with the Bougainville Peace Agreement and the National Constitution.” The questions were presented in English and Tok-pisin: “Question in English: (*Put X in the box*). Do you agree for Bougainville to have: 1. Greater Autonomy; 2. Independence”. Given below the boxes is a summary: “Referendum process is: 1. Eligible people of Bougainville will vote in this referendum; 2. National Government and ABG will consult; 3. National Parliament decides on the outcome of the referendum.” While we are given to understand that this was only a document for discussion, a draft subject to debate, we take note that it already removes one option which was preferred by a Bougainvillean of mixed Sepik parentage who said she wanted all autonomy removed so that Bougainville would be a province like any other.

In recent years in Papua New Guinea, the elections have started with a great display of strength in the form of fleets of vehicles following a leader and chanting their message, whether in town or in the rural centres. This has sometimes been accompanied by a display of money on split pitpit sticks, which are meant to support the candidates’ efforts. Even the opposite is possible, as candidates spread money around to sponsor “coffee nights” for discussion in the villages of the electorate, or to pay for demands made by supporters who hosted celebrations or pig killings for the candidate.

In preparation for the Referendum, Patrick Nasira writes disparagingly of some organisations who use social media for a simplistic response to the question of Independence. Nasira feels this kind of campaigning is simply not needed and constitutes interference from outside.

Common roll update

A possible major issue for the referendum election on Bougainville would be the updating of the common roll. The bulk of the population anywhere in PNG are in the rural areas and if the common roll is not updated on time or done properly or does not include everyone, the obviously significant impact would be that fewer people vote and the credibility of the overall outcome of the vote is impacted.

In PNG elections in 2017, a common complaint by voters in many electorates was that they could not find their names on the common roll and they were turned away at voting stations. The underlying issue to this is that the update of the common roll was done hastily and in a short period of time. There were also speculations that the common roll update was manipulated by the limited availability of voter information forms which were numbered so that they could not be photocopied. A certain number of forms were given to a ward; the number of forms given to a certain ward did not consider the voting age population in that area and so officials who carried out this exercise ran out of forms. Therefore, a good number of people missed out because they did not have a form to fill in; or if they filled in a form and still did not have their names on the common roll, it probably meant that the form they filled in was photocopied as the officials who carried out this exercise ran out of the original copies.

On 2 July 2018, it was reported in The National newspaper (p. 4) that the ABG President, John Momis, had said that his government had not updated the common roll to prepare voters to go for polls for the referendum. Momis further stated that in order for the voting to be successful, the common roll should have been updated by April 2018. The reason for the delay was that the government needed at least K5–6 million to undertake the enrolment process. Despite this, the ABG’s new community government system hopes to work with their village ward recorders to make sure that the rolls are accurate. The Bougainville Government was yet to complete the update of the common roll at the time of writing (2018). Funding then becomes another major issue in the common roll update. In December 2018, the Bougainville Referendum Commission (BRC) circulated information regarding the enrolment and verification procedure, highlighting the five key steps to the final voter roll on social media (Facebook)

under the Autonomous Bougainville Government page. Questions raised in January 2019 relating to this circular were about Bougainvilleans living in other parts of PNG and abroad, and how they would vote. A response was that Bougainvilleans outside of Bougainville would be advised where to go to enrol. As the referendum date is scheduled for 15 June, 2019, is this already too late?

The campaign period

Suggestions by Qvortrup and others recommend that campaigning be funded by the Government and that it be limited and evenly distributed to both sides, and be run by two umbrella organisations for the sides. (Qvortrup 2018, p. 19ff.) One-sided campaign power or threats will certainly make a difference to the perceptions of countryside people. Edition 13 of the Bougainville Bulletin appeared on 7 January 2019, and there have been photos of the distribution of the paper on the roadsides from a car, or on the seaside from an outrigger canoe. This does imply that radio would remain the news medium of choice for most of the Region. Reports indicate that radio coverage for Central and South Bougainville is in fact poor.

Electoral officials are well aware of the possibilities of hijacking ballot papers on their way out from the headquarters in the morning or over the course of the 14 days of voting. An extended voting period like the one planned suggests that there will be patrols of election teams going out into remote areas, carrying their ballot box to perhaps 10 localities, under the protection of police or security. One of the writers here spent an afternoon trying to dissuade an angry villager from taking away the ballot boxes because he had not been paid his promised allowances over the last three elections. The compromise at this time was that the villager took home an empty ballot box and slept with it overnight, allowing the already recorded votes to remain with the team. If this scenario is repeated too often during the Referendum, then there will be a growing conviction that the Referendum itself was hijacked and that the result does not represent the will of the people. Payment of promised stipends is always to be anticipated as a problem.

The voting process

Being able to read and write and comprehend information is vital especially when it comes to voting. As Marks (2018, p. 9) states, there is “no recent reliable data for AROB” relating to the literacy level, however, there is a report by Thomas, et al. (2017) that “indicates a general low level of literacy.” The low level of literacy can or may possibly contribute towards the issue of double voting. In the recent PNG 2017 elections,

even in those “reasonable” areas where “one person, one vote” was the desired practice, it was observed that a lot of persons were assisted by a group of others who were literate and in certain instances, it was observed that the illiterate person had no say at the polling booth; the assistant or the literate person was voting for the illiterate person. It was sometimes questionable why the “assistant” was in the voting booth at all. One young man was observed requesting an assistant, and then in turn serving as an assistant for someone else. When asked why he did this, since he was known as literate, he replied, “I need the school fees.” This means he was being credited with voting for the right person, and was being enrolled as a supporter deserving help from the winning candidate. However, knowing how everyone voted is also good as an early exit poll, leaving no surprises when it comes to counting the votes.

It is part of the democratic process that voting should be secret and fair: “one person, one vote”. Until now in PNG, there has been little respect for the secrecy of the ballot. This brings up issues of double voting at least by influence over another person voting. This may possibly happen during the referendum voting. To avoid this, the BRC could have mechanisms in place where illiterate persons are assisted by neutral election officials only.

The role of observers

The presence of election observers during the Bougainville elections for a referendum is essential. Observation during any election process promotes peace and democracy; the presence of observers is valuable towards improving election processes and this also helps to build public confidence. With all that has happened in Bougainville, the ten-year civil crisis and the peace processes, weapons disposal, the emergence of the Bougainville Transitional Government (BTG) and now the move towards a referendum, observers should be seen as essential components of the whole election process. Experiences from the 2017 general elections in PNG showed that the presence of observers at any polling or counting station made all stakeholders in the election process, officials and voters, aware of the importance of following election rules and basically doing things democratically to ensure that the elections were safe and fair for all. Spaces were made available for the observers, and events about to happen were explained. For example, when there was a mild uproar about a boy, clearly not over 14 years old, who succeeded in casting his vote, it was explained to the observers that his parents insisted he was 18 and that his name was on the roll. “Observers play a critical role in helping promote and protect the civil and political rights of participants in elections.”

(United Nations Development Program 2017).

Counting the votes

Counting and reporting the tally of the votes has become streamlined in these times. Mobile phones make it possible to report results quickly and to give adequate warning of threats to the counting process, even from the remote places. The crisis times in Bougainville were times of ruthless action and a disregard for the consequences of violence. It is conceivable some groups, in strategic areas such as Panguna, might not want the counting process to go smoothly. But in such a counting situation, with only “1 or 2” to be counted, it is also conceivable that preliminary results can be sent to Buin on the night of Friday 25 October 2019, and a result acknowledged the same day, as in more mechanised countries.

Regaining trust

The upcoming referendum in Bougainville requires collaborative patronage from PNG and Bougainville governments. Bell & McVeigh deal at length with the question of “thinking through how equality and minority representation will be provided for symbolically once the voting is over.” (2018, p. 64). Both governments (GoPNG and ABG) are duty bound to progress the agenda with the aim of ensuring the outcome is credible, peaceful and respected by all parties for the benefit of the people of Bougainville. It has been stated by Ellis (2018, p. ix) in his commissioned research report that three factors remain crucial when planning a referendum. The three factors are consistent in all the countries which underwent referenda at one time, and they are discussed in terms of: (a) factors specific to the referendum as the mechanism for making a policy choice; (b) factors common to the success of any electoral process; and (c) factors characteristic of the successful functioning of any organisation. The experience in East Timor (1999) and the recent New Caledonia (2018) experience run through similar margins and can be anticipated in the Bougainville referendum. Many of these factors remain strong and can influence legitimacy and credibility of the referendum thus depending on design and implementation processes.

The aspiration of rebuilding trust and confidence between the two governments (GoPNG and ABG) and amongst the people of Bougainville has demanded ongoing propaganda and remains a strong component in the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) since 2001. There are areas of mutual collaboration by the two governments (GoPNG and ABG) and to ensure ABG is referendum-ready. The outcomes of the long series of efforts following the BPA (2001) will be given in the coming referendum.

An element of ambiguity will remain on the choices to determine the outcome as it is required that the Government of PNG will send the Referendum result to the PNG parliament to determine the issue. The government of PNG should anticipate its options following the outcome of the referendum to plan its future engagement with ABG. Whatever the outcome turns out to be, advance planning and preparation must keep the GoPNG focused and in a strategic mode. Come, 12 October 2019 or shortly thereafter, there will be the final determination of the ABG’s future political status and this will ramify into other branches of Public Service and government. The government of PNG should review its ongoing commitment with ABG government based on its present strengths on fiscal and technical capacity to assist ABG towards the Referendum and beyond. The people of ARoB must be on a sure footing, as to envision what the future holds for them after the referendum results are processed.

Building on from a fragile and volatile peace process has been a significant achievement for GoPNG and ABG. The development and adoption of BPA (2001) as a premier document has led to the establishment and engagement of the two governments (GoPNG and ABG) to continue this far. At this juncture, a true Melanesian spirit of oneness might be restored in a complete reconciliation process for the two governments (GoPNG and ABG) and with the people of PNG and ARoB. This process is crucial to prepare the two governments (GoPNG and ABG) with their people to go into the polls with a renewed sense of mind and purpose. Moreover, the international community, donors and partners, our Pacific Islands countries, coupled with Australia and New Zealand would be grateful to see such an occasion make its conclusion in a way that serves the interests of all. They would join arms to see GoPNG and ABG resolve differences together and move forward with a collective desire for seeing a positive outcome of the people’s vote.

The government of PNG has undertaken restoration of ABG and its ARoB people after the BPA document was developed and implemented. As part of the GoPNG commitment to restore ABG and its people, the then O’Neill–Dion government pledged to support ABG with funding of K100 million annually as development and infrastructure support grants. It was agreed that the allocated grant would be disbursed in quarterly tranches until the full disbursement was completed annually. Over the years, ABG has had issues of funding cuts from the GoPNG, which has forced ABG to scale down its operations and stop funding its infrastructure

plans. It must be presumed that such interaction from the GoPNG has harmed the firmly built relationship with ABG and its people.

Managing a referendum successfully is the ultimate goal of managing expectations of the people of Bougainville. Going forward, we desire the open and transparent dialogue at the centre of the original peace process be instituted and continued after the vote. The referendum process and the final outcome will determine whether GoPNG and ABG have fully or only partially met the requirements and expectations of the ARoB people as stipulated in the BPA (2001). At the end of the referendum, we should further delve into the question of what ARoB counts as greater autonomy or independence from GoPNG. The range of likelihoods in this has been investigated by Bell & McVeigh (2018). As one of our non-residential Bougainville consultants said, “We were the first with Independence. We were the first with Autonomy. We handled that well. We can handle the results of the Referendum too.”

Potential strategies to address issues emanating from the referendum

- Ensure Bougainvilleans are aware of the implications of the results of the referendum and that they will respect the majority decision (plenty of awareness needed leading up to the referendum).
- Ensure reconciliation ceremonies done the Bougainville Way are observed and held to resolve any disputes or conflicts that may arise.
- Involve chiefs, both men and women, especially in areas where there are bound to be large numbers of youth engaged (for purposes of ensuring peaceful and smooth transition).
- Ensure transparency in communicating processes and procedures, including information about life after the referendum (open dialogue is encouraged).
- Ensure resettlement or re-establishment plans have been widely shared or disseminated prior to the referendum so that the people of ARoB know what to expect and will be prepared for the after-effects of the referendum.
- Continuous dialogue between the GoPNG and ABG in addressing challenges that may arise as both governments equally share responsibilities

Conclusion

The outcome of the referendum will not be an agreeable choice for a large minority of ARoB and PNG people. As much as the anticipated reconciliation process goes ahead, the likelihood of firmly held resentments on both sides of the

divide (ARoB and PNG) will call for positive dialogue and engagement. We can only remain firm in our support for the ARoB people to go through a fair and safe election. Let the voters speak for the next step in the destiny of Bougainville. As the statesman, Barack Obama, might advise, “The people have spoken.” ARoB people, we wish you a safe and prosperous election outcome.

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