

Bougainville bulletin

by Tess Newton Cain

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As we move closer to 2015, which brings to an end to the post-conflict 10 years of semi-autonomous government on the island of Bougainville, there is a lot of thinking and discussion about what the future may hold politically, socially and economically.

It is now 12 years since the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and there are signs that what had originally been a very dynamic process of developing autonomy with a view to possible independence (to be decided by a referendum in the period 2015-2020) is losing steam. At a [recent conference](#) [pdf], President John Momis raised concerns about the apparent under-investment in the region by the Papua New Guinea government with reference to the potential [political consequences](#) of that. The political situation is further complicated by an apparent lack of understanding on the part of PNG government stakeholders as to the implications of the Bougainville Peace Agreement in terms of both substance and process. Meanwhile the Autonomous Bougainville Government is struggling with financial management and accountability in relation to funds that have been received.

A particular area of contention surrounds the possible re-opening of the Panguna copper mine. Dame Carol Kidu recently joined the Board of Bougainville Copper Ltd, the previous operators. She has [argued recently](#) that if the lessons of the past can be truly learned that there is a place for mining and resource extraction in the economic development of the country. However, other voices have expressed a wish for the mine to remain closed and for the people of Bougainville to look to other economic opportunities such as [agriculture](#) and [tourism](#). Prior to the conflict Bougainville scored consistently highly in relation to all development indicators with an enviable record of service delivery funded by Panguna. Which begs the question, can Bougainville sustain autonomy and/or independence without re-engaging with mining?

[Some commentators](#) have gone so far as to warn that there are security risks associated with proceeding to a referendum in the absence of capacity and political will to implement the resulting political settlement. They advocate an Australia-led pre-referendum injection of large-scale aid as a means of obviating the need for a RAMSI-style remediation, though whether an aid intervention can be so decisive

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seems unlikely. **Elsewhere**, Australia has been cautioned against exacerbating existing distrust arising from Australian involvement in the war and explicit encouragement for the recommencement of mining at Panguna.

The next few years will be of crucial importance for Bougainville, Papua New Guinea and the wider region. There is a lot at stake, most importantly the future wellbeing of the island's people.

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