Will 2020 be the Year Bougainville Gains Independence?

Bougainville Island (which is slightly larger than Cyprus in terms of area) and the smaller Buka Island that is adjacent to it, and that has the capital which bears the same name, is located in the northern part of the Solomon Islands archipelago in the southern Pacific, and is part of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest state in Oceania. About 300,000 people inhabit Bougainville, while almost 9 million people live in Papua New Guinea. Bougainville enjoys a special status as the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, which was earned through tremendous efforts and a civil war that lasted an entire decade, from 1988 to 1998, and killed at least 15,000 people.

Starting in the 2000s, Bougainvilleans continued to fight for independence using peaceful methods, and finally in 2019 the island held a referendum on whether Bougainville should secede from Papua New Guinea. Following the voting, 97.7% of its residents voted in favor of independence. And, from August-September 2020, elections were held to elect a president for the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, which attracted attention worldwide.

This attention stemmed from the fact that Bougainville has one of the largest copper deposits in the world: according to experts, the Panguna Mine (which has lain idle since the civil war) contains approximately 5.3 million tons of copper and 19.3 million ounces of gold, with a total value of 60 billion USD.

At the same time, in the 21st century the situation around the world requires a colossal amount of vigilance on the part of small countries in terms of choosing their “protégés” in the form of major powers, without which modern international politics could not be accomplished.

Not only Papua New Guinea, but also Australia, that ruled PNG until 1975, and China, upon whose financial decisions almost all countries of the world already depend to one degree or another, and primarily the neighboring countries, including PNG and Australia, claim to play the role of Bougainville’s "patrons" or "friends".

And the next foreign policy steps taken by Ishmael Toroama, the new President of Bougainville and a 51-year-old ex-commander of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army that fought for independence, will determine the island’s future fate. One extremely important question is who is going to participate in helping develop the Panguna Mine. Starting in the 1970s, and before developing the field was suspended, that was done by the organization Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL) under the control of the Australian company Rio Tinto, and profits were directed both to the Australian economy and to Papua New Guinea’s federal government budget (which owned 20% of the shares in BCL) - but none of it reached the Bougainville people themselves. Moreover, loopholes in legislation and environmental problems strongly pitted the Bougainvilleans against the Australians. Consequently, I. Toroama's task will be to ensure that extracting the huge reserves of copper will benefit all the stakeholders concerned, both within the country and abroad, provided that the proper balance of power can be maintained.

As far as the position taken by Papua New Guinea is concerned, the country’s Prime Minister James Marape, who came to power in 2019, clearly expressed his point of view, saying that he would willingly discuss with measures with I. Toroama to gradually grant independence to Bougainville.

Australia, forced to maneuver between the interests held by PNG and its own interests in Bougainville, has remained silent for a long time since the island’s independence referendum results were disclosed in 2019. Canberra is interested in keeping Bougainville in its sphere of strategic influence within the framework of its defense policy, and is ready to use the usual levers, such as financial assistance, that can influence the foreign policy taken by small island states around the South Pacific Ocean. Finally, only just recently Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison
announced that Australia supports the process initiated after the Bougainville referendum, and will encourage PNG and the government in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville to cooperate in helping Bougainville secure its independence.

China, in turn, cautiously let it be known that it is ready to give support to the new Bougainvillean government. It became known that Beijing is able to offer the Bougainvillean economy about 1 billion USD in investments, and thereby contribute to the transition process of gaining political independence. It is anticipated that Chinese investments will be made to help develop mining, tourism, and agriculture. At the same time, information came to light about the Chinese side building a new port in the western part of Bougainville Island, despite the fact that two busy ports are already present there. There has never been any doubt that after Bougainville gains independence, China will immediately establish diplomatic relations with it.

The secession of Bougainville from the PNG that could take place soon cannot be perceived dispassionately by Indonesia, which is watching what is happening with alarm. The thing is that if Bougainville turns into an independent state then a precedent will come into existence that separatist forces can draw from who are speaking out for the Indonesian provinces of West Papua and Papua, both of which are located in the western part of the island of New Guinea. Residents in these provinces in 2019 submitted an application to the UN to hold their own independence referendums.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the issue of Bougainville’s independence will be resolved gradually, and the results of the 2019 referendum have yet to be reviewed by the National Parliament of Papua New Guinea; that will presumably take place in the coming months. At the same time, the new government in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville will have to become involved in domestic political affairs that are aimed toward developing the island’s economy; the core of this will be the profit generated from resuming work at the Panguna gold and copper mine. It should be kept in mind that, despite how attractive what was once one of the largest deposits in the world is, the political uncertainty associated with it still keeps major global companies from investing, and a significant amount of that will go to upgrade the mine’s primary equipment.

As mentioned above, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville will also have to deal with China, which in the past decade has shown an interest in the South Pacific not only from a commercial point of view, but also from a strategic one. This distresses Australia, which is trying to maintain its dominant position in the region, keeping other players out of its shores, and this may lead to it intensifying its focus on Bougainville.

In any event, the process for Bougainville to gain independence, and the recent election of its new president, have caused experts to pay steady attention to it; they are watching one of the most exciting political events of this year with interest.

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