

‘Quad needs to befriend Bougainville, not just Papua New Guinea’



John D. Kuhns

***‘China may be getting ready to do in PNG what it has already pulled off in the Solomon Islands. Is it really smart for Australia, let alone its diplomatic friends in the Quad to bet everything on PNG?’***

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Papua New Guinea (PNG) in early 2023. It will be the first time an Indian Prime Minister visits the country of 9.3 million people since its independence from Australia in 1975.

One of the key issues in PNG is the future of the country’s relationship with the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. To understand more about the situation, in this edition of “Indo-Pacific: Behind the Headlines”, we spoke with John D. Kuhns, author of *‘They Call Me Ishmael’*, a novel about Bougainville President Ishmael Toroama. He is also the Chairman & CEO of NumaNuma Resources, Inc., a company developing infrastructure in Bougainville, where he has lived and worked since 2015.

***Q: What is Bougainville?***

*A:* While Bougainville, an archipelago of approximately 200 islands, is geographically part of the Solomon Islands, it is currently a political unit of PNG. Even though PNG and Bougainville are both part of Melanesia, a culturally distinct region of the Pacific running roughly in parallel with Australia’s northeast coast, the populations of the two areas have significant differences.

***Q: What is the “Crisis”?***

*A:* The Crisis was a series of disturbances that escalated into a civil war fought between Bougainville and PNG over societal and financial disagreements fomented by the Panguna Mine, a gargantuan copper and gold mine developed on Bougainville Island by the Rio Tinto Group and its special-purpose subsidiary, Bougainville Copper Limited.

When PNG secured its independence from Australia in 1975, its leaders duped Australia into allowing it to grab almost two-thirds of the cash from the Panguna Mine (at the time the world’s largest and most profitable copper and gold mine), leaving little for the people of Bougainville, even though the PNG mainland was over a thousand kilometers distant from Bougainville and its people weren’t suffering from the mine’s social and environmental pressures. As PNG absconded with the cow, Bougainville was handed a fistful of beans.

Australia, who oversaw the deal and should have clearly recognized its unfairness to Bougainville, offered no objections. Civil war could not have come as a surprise to any of the parties involved. In the conflagration that followed, including not only ten years of military strife but also a multi-year embargo, 20,000 Bougainvilleans perished. Towns and villages were burned to the ground; the Panguna Mine closed, never to reopen. The economy of the Province of the North Solomons, as Bougainville was called at the time—the most affluent of all of PNG’s provinces—was totally obliterated; today, it is PNG’s poorest.

***Q: Who is Ishmael Toroama, the President of Bougainville?***

*A:* Ishmael Toroama is the man who, barely past his boyhood, led the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) from 1988-1998 in the Crisis. He led his BRA guerillas to a stand-off with PNG’s Defence Force, a vastly larger and better equipped armed force—and he did it on his own, receiving no assistance from any foreign source.

***Q: What was the role of Australia during the Crisis?***

*A:* Rumours abound as to exactly what assistance Australia provided to PNG’s Defence Force, but not surprisingly, Bougainvilleans are nearly unanimous in their condemnation. Australia’s justification? It had a multi-billion investment in PNG and needed to preserve it. It wouldn’t be the last time Australia was willing to overlook fairness with respect to how it treated Bougainville in favour of continuing to spoil an unrepentant PNG.

***Q: The Crisis ended with the Bougainville Peace Agreement. What’s in the Agreement?***

*A:* When Ishmael led Bougainville in signing the Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001, he showed that he was not only a capable military leader, but a practical politician. He, like most Bougainvilleans, had long yearned to be free of the yoke of colonialists—whether Spanish, French, German, Australian, Japanese, or even Melanesian brothers from PNG—but also realized freedom could only come when Bougainville was ready.

Ishmael and the other Bougainville leaders agreed—for a period of time—to remain part of PNG, but not as a mere province, rather as the Autonomous Region of Bougainville with its own constitution, duly-elected president, and legislation, courts and laws.

Ishmael was also skillful enough to negotiate a key plank in the Peace Agreement allowing, within 20 years, a vote by Bougainvilleans as to whether they desired to remain part of PNG or become independent. The idea was that if PNG and Bougainville could get along, they would end up sticking together; if not, independence would rule.

In the December 2019 vote, 97.7% of Bougainvilleans voted for independence. That tells you all you need to know about Bougainvilleans’ opinion of PNG. Running on a platform emphasizing independence, Ishmael Toroama was elected Bougainville’s President one year later, in the fall of 2020.

***Q: What is happening now with independence for Bougainville?***

*A:* According to the Peace Agreement, the independence referendum is not binding. In the subsequent joint supervisory board meetings, a series of quarterly sessions involving negotiations between President Toroama and the current Prime Minister of PNG, James Marape, the two sides have staked out their positions.

Not surprisingly, Ishmael’s stance has never wavered: His people, who waited politely and followed the rules, have spoken. Independence for Bougainville is, in their eyes, finally inevitable.

Meanwhile, in PNG, a recipient of hundreds of millions from Australia over the years to little tangible result, there seems to be a sense that, maybe, the problem will just go away. Yes, the Panguna Mine, when it is inevitably redeveloped, is an asset that PNG would hate to lose—but PNG has dozens of mines now.

***Q: After a recent visit to PNG and statements by Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles, President Toroama wrote: “I assure the governments of PNG and Australia that my government and my people do not take kindly to threats and we will never kowtow to neo-colonists that seek to usurp the sovereignty of Pacific island nations with their bullying tactics and intimidation.” How is Australia reacting to the prospects of Bougainville independence?***

*A:* No one should be surprised by Minister Marles’ recent gaffe regarding Bougainville’s bid for independence from Papua New Guinea, or the indignant response by President Toroama. Both men were articulating what most analysts following events in the South Pacific have known but been reticent to admit: Australia’s government has dithered for too long in the bubble of “its backyard,” playing a colonial-era-like chessboard game whose rules bear little relation to current reality.

What’s more, as opposed to the languorous decades after WWII, in today’s contest there is much at stake—not just for Australia, but for the rest of the world as well.

In Australia, what should have been instructive reverberations emanating from the Bougainvillean independence vote, have fallen on deaf ears. They've got other things to worry about. Despite having lavished PNG with largesse, they have watched with growing concern as China exerts more and more influence over their stepchild.

Since Bougainville's departure could theoretically weaken PNG, Defence Minister Marles was clear: Australia's backing PNG, implying they're against Bougainville's independence—the 97.7% of people pining for it (and the risk of igniting another “Crisis”) be damned.

Australia's strategy is nothing if not self-serving: Since they're blowing millions there anyway, PNG can be the lynchpin with respect to controlling their South Pacific “backyard.” No one in Australia seems to be capable of observing the obvious: PNG may not have the fortitude to be a lynchpin, of Australia's strategy in the South Pacific, or perhaps any other diplomatic endeavour.

True, PNG's geographic position is compelling, and it is blessed with resources, including dozens of mines and plentiful oil and gas, but its nine million population remains destitute. PNG has shown little ability to harvest, let alone distribute, its natural wealth.

A prominent international financial journal recently announced that Port Moresby, PNG's capital, is the world's third most dangerous city. PNG Power, the national power company, is insolvent; its largest power customer, the PNG government, hasn't paid its bill in six years. PNG's government departments are being evicted from their offices for years of non-payment of rent.

***Q: What is the role of China?***

*A:* It may be true that if Australia and other Western powers don't pay more attention to PNG, China will. The PRC has already underwritten PNG's APEC 2018 soiree, its state-owned-enterprises are dominant players in PNG's precious minerals and oil & gas industries, and totally control other major industries like fishing as well.

***Q: What should be the response of the Quad? Is there a role for India?***

*A:* Indeed, China may be getting ready to do in PNG what it has already pulled off in the Solomon Islands. If there's a risk of that happening, is it really smart for Australia, let alone its diplomatic friends in the Quad, including the United States, Japan, and India, to bet everything on PNG?

Perhaps the Quad should hedge its bets. What about giving both PNG and Bougainville a shot at befriending the Quad in the South Pacific? Everyone knows that the best deepwater port in the region isn't in the county named the Solomon Islands: it's in Arawa, on Bougainville Island.

On a per capita basis, Bougainville is as naturally endowed as PNG. The Panguna Mine alone has copper and gold worth \$100 billion; there are potentially several Panguna Mines in Bougainville. Bougainville's fishery is rich as well.

It's a good thing that Prime Minister Modi of India will soon visit PNG. He seems comfortable sharing tough truths with other world leaders. A frank observant, like India's Prime Minister Modi, who is set to visit the region soon, might help lend a fresh perspective. Hopefully, he can see PNG up close and assess things for himself. The Quad needs every member's opinion. Its game in the South Pacific's could end up being for all the marbles, and the parties have a lot to lose.

My money's on Ishmael.