

Bougainville referendum

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Source: *The Hindu*

Manifest pedagogy: UPSC has sometimes pulled out of its hat some eccentric and maverick questions. This aspect is more pronounced in the case of history where we have seen questions like the independence movements in Western Africa and Malayan peninsula. Even though it is impossible to target all the areas out of a sense of General Curiosity we can have a look at the history of Pacific Islands. We have covered the geography of the region too as we can expect some map based question on this region. The trigger for the article is the Bougainville referendum.

In news: The people of Bougainville, an island group in Papua New Guinea, held a referendum for independence recently.

Placing it in syllabus: Events in world history

Static dimensions:

- Geography of Oceania
- Colonial Rule of Pacific Islands
- Independence from Colonial Rule

Current dimensions:

- Bougainville referendum
- Geo-Political implications of Independence for Bougainville

Content:

Geography of Oceania:

- Oceania is a region made up of thousands of **islands throughout the Central and South Pacific Ocean.**
- It includes **Australia**, the smallest continent in terms

of total land area.

- The other two major landmasses of Oceania are the **microcontinent of Zealandia, which includes the country of New Zealand, and the eastern half of the island of New Guinea**, made up of the nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG).
- Oceania also includes **three island regions: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (including the U.S. state of Hawaii)**.



- Oceania extends to New Guinea in the west, the Bonin Islands in the northwest, the Hawaiian Islands in the northeast, and Macquarie Island in the south.
- Oceanian islands are of **four basic types**: continental islands, high islands, coral reefs and uplifted coral platforms.
- **High islands are of volcanic origin**, and many contain active volcanoes. E.g. **Bougainville**, Hawaii and Solomon Islands.
- Geographically the **islands of Bougainville and Buka are part of the Solomon Islands archipelago**, but are politically separate from the independent country of Solomon Islands.
- Historically the **region was known as North Solomons**.
- The island regions of **Micronesia and Polynesia** are dominated by low islands (**coral islands**).
- **Oceania is one of eight terrestrial ecozones**, which constitute the major ecological regions of the planet.

Colonial Rule of Pacific Islands:

- The **unstable conditions in the Pacific** began to draw in European governments.
- The **French government was the first to intervene**, after two Roman Catholic missionaries were expelled from Tahiti in 1836. In the same year, two more were deported

from Hawaii.

- **Tahitians were formally granted French protectorate in 1843.**
- In 1853 the presence of French **missionaries in New Caledonia led to French annexation** and established a penal colony (to which convicts were transported until 1897).
- **Samoa** became the greatest trading centre for plantations and remained the favourite colony of the colonial party in **German politics.**
- The **British government appointed consuls to some islands**, but their powers to maintain order were limited for the visits of warships.
- The **United States also appointed consuls.**
- Consular officers often quarreled with European entrepreneurs, and both became involved in the internal politics of Oceanian societies.
- **Britain accepted control of Fiji in 1874** primarily because native authority had broken down.
- The British passed the Western Pacific Order in Council (1877), which granted the governor of Fiji authority over British nationals and vessels in a wide area of the western Pacific.
- **European government**, both mission and commercial enterprise, slowly to **penetrated Melanesia.**
- **German interests were marked in Micronesia**, as were those of the French in the New Hebrides.
- A number of groups in Australia also looked on New Guinea as a rich possession.
- But the British government would not annex unless the Australian colonies paid the cost of administration.
- When the Australian colonies agreed to pay, the British government acted.
- **Southeast New Guinea was declared a protectorate in 1884 and annexed four years later by British.**
- The **Cooks became a protectorate in 1888 and were annexed in 1901.**

- **Germany annexed northeastern New Guinea** in 1884, including the Bismarck Archipelago.
- In 1886 Germany took **possession of the northern Solomons (Buka and Bougainville)**.
- The British established a protectorate over the rest of the Solomons in 1893.

Independence from Colonial Rule:

- For **strategic and economic reasons**, the Pacific has not been completely decolonized.
- **France granted French citizenship in its Pacific territories in 1946.**
- The **Northern Marianas** chose to become a **commonwealth of the United States**.
- The resource-poor **Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia** all voted for **free association with the United States**, securing self-government but continued economic and military ties.
- The **Cook Islands and Niue** chose **free association with New Zealand**, which granted them local self-government.
- Most of the other Pacific Islands had achieved independence by 1980.
- There were no mass nationalist movements, as in Africa and Asia, to whose demands colonial governments responded.
- In Fiji and Papua New Guinea, political parties formed.
- In the **French territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia** violent confrontations broke out in the 1980s.
- Hence **accords were signed in 1988 and 1998** regarding a timetable for self-determination.
- In **Papua New Guinea (PNG)** long-simmering domestic secessionist movement on **Bougainville Island group** reached a crisis in the late 1980s.



- Following years of violent conflict, Bougainville,

together with nearby islands, was **granted the status of an autonomous region in the early 21st century.**

Bougainville referendum:

The people of Bougainville, in the recently held referendum voted overwhelmingly for independence. Voters had **two options – more autonomy or full independence.**

In total, **181,067 ballots were cast.** Of those:

- **176,928 voted for independence (98.3%)**
- 3,043 voted for greater autonomy
- 1,096 were classed as informal, or void.

The referendum was approved by the PNG government, but the **result is non-binding.** However, the landslide victory will put pressure on PNG to grant Bougainville independence.

Why was referendum held?

- Though the islands had attempted to declare independence during the formation of PNG in 1975, they were ignored.



- **When PNG was granted independence in 1975, Bougainville became a province.**
- Though there was a declaration of independence shortly before PNG was formed, it was ignored by both Australia and PNG.
- The declaration was the manifestation of a **Bougainville identity** which developed during the 20th Century.
- The **primary marker of that identity was dark skin colour of most Bougainvilleans compared to people from elsewhere in PNG.**
- After the failed independence declaration, in **1988 the nine-year separatist war** began in which around 12-13% of the islands' population was killed.
- The fighting **came to an end in 1997** with help from

international mediators.

- The result was the **Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA)**, the creation in 2005 of the **Autonomous Bougainville Government**, and the promise of a non-binding referendum on independence.

Now as the referendum was non-binding, independence won't happen automatically. Discussions will take place with the PNG government to decide when or if, the transition to full independence can begin.

The new country would be small, with a land mass of less than 10,000 sq km (slightly larger than Cyprus, and slightly smaller than Lebanon). Likewise, its population would be one of the world's smallest.

Geo-Political implications of independence for Bougainville:

An independent Bougainville sends a strong signal for other **self-determination movements** across the Pacific, including in **New Caledonia which will hold a second referendum for independence in 2020.**

Though the referendum has raised hopes for a better future among **Bougainville's "lost generation" of youth**, it has also sparked a scramble for political influence among foreign mining companies, which want to establish operations in an area that **contains copper and gold reserves.**

Copper has been extracted on a large scale since the 1960s under Australian administration. But mining has been crippled by the war and the distribution of revenue was one of the factors behind the conflict. Australia, **Bougainville's biggest donor** was involved in the mediation that ended the fighting.

China's interest in Bougainville is two-fold: First, it is seeking to shore up **diplomatic support in the Pacific Islands region**, thereby reducing support for Taiwan which lost a further two Pacific allies this year (Solomon Islands and

Kiribati). Second is to **access to resources, namely fisheries and extractive minerals.**

Meanwhile, the **US** is watching the developments closely. It **along with Australia, New Zealand, and Japan have provided funds to help with the referendum.**

Bougainville has already been a **victim of the “resource curse”**. Between 1972 and 1989 errant copper and gold mining activity caused serious pollution and tensions which forced the **Panguna Mines** to close.

The **other critical milestones** include the **Autonomous Bougainville Government elections**, the first elections following the referendum and the **Papua New Guinea’s national elections** which are scheduled for 2022. The risk in both cases is that Bougainville’s future becomes a political pawn. An independent Bougainville will face significant challenges and diverse choices.