

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE IN BOUGAINVILLE: POSSIBILITIES FOR GOVERNANCE BEYOND THE COLONIAL-CAPITALIST SYSTEM

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Introduction

What is the problem facing Bougainville today that the referendum seeks to address? Some may view the problem as one of continued colonisation by Papua New Guinea (PNG). In this instance the solution appears relatively straight forward – vote for independence. Others may view the problem as lack of options for economic development to support an independent Bougainville and subsequently the threat of re-opening the Panguna mine in order that Bougainville is able to sustain itself economically. For those of this view, if the cost of independence is re-opening the mine, then this may be too high a price.

This paper takes the position that the referendum is a continuation of the struggle in Bougainville against the ‘colonial-capitalist system’. As the term ‘colonial-capitalist system’ implies, capitalism was introduced and propagated in Bougainville through colonialist intervention. As Kristian Lasslett explains, by the 1960s Bougainville was gradually besieged politically, economically, and ideologically, by an Australian colonial power seeking to induct communities into the logic of liberal capitalism.¹ At the centre of this colonial-capitalist system was a large-scale copper and gold mine (the Panguna mine) operated by the Rio Tinto subsidiary Bougainville Copper

Limited (BCL) between 1972 and 1988. With Australia and then PNG governing the affairs of Bougainville, the mine was portrayed as a vehicle through which Bougainville, and PNG more widely, would earn the revenues to secure the form of life enjoyed by the former colonial power and ‘progress’ towards a successful modern state. However, the mine significantly impacted on communities, including the dispossession of community land and its contents; forced displacement from ancestral homes; imprisonment for resisting the mine’s construction; and the large-scale devastation of the surrounding ecosystems, which was experienced as a deeply spiritual and material loss.²

Such conditions provided the motivation for the armed resistance that followed, led by the revolution’s figurehead, Francis Ona. In a letter written by Ona dated 29 November 1989, he aptly describes the colonial-capitalist system when he explains how “Others have become rich by exploiting us especially the foreigners and a handful black power wielders in Papua New Guinea. We are the ‘sacrificial lamb’ for the few capitalists whose hunger for wealth is quenchless and unceasing...We are not going to sit by and watch capitalists and their Papua New Guinean political allies exploiting us”.³

However, while capitalism may still be consid-

ered an externally imposed system, the governance arrangements that enable the system to continue to expand in Bougainville today are no longer the remit of a colonial power. Rather, today it is certain groups from within Bougainville that are continuing the colonial-capitalist legacy by arguing that mining is the guarantee that Bougainville can prove itself as an economically self-reliant and modern state. For example, in an obscene perversion of the revolutionary struggle against the colonial-capitalist system, Bougainville's President, John Momis, claims "Francis [Ona] was not trying to end the mine for ever. No – his complaint was about the unfair treatment of Bougainville. He wanted the rights of Bougainvilleans recognised. He wanted fair distribution of the revenue ... We have continued that same struggle throughout the peace

process".⁴ Similarly, at a ceremony in February 2018 recognising the granting of a mining exploration license in Tunania, Deputy Opposition Leader Timothy Masiu stated, "This is a breakthrough. This is the day that our former leaders and our people have dreamt of and fought for".⁵

Therefore, what if the source of the problem today is not simply independence from Papua New Guinea, but the very failure of the revolutionary uprising to lead to an enduring alternative to western liberal-capitalist governance? In other words, what if the key problem today for Bougainville is the task of transforming governance mechanisms in Bougainville so that they function in a different way? What options has the Government? What are the concrete possibilities for governance that will

1. Kristian Lasslett, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire: Rio Tinto, the War on Bougainville and Resistance to Mining* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

2. Ibid.

3. Francis Ona, 29 November 1989, p. 3.

4. John Momis, cited in, 'Voices of the People', Jubilee Australia, September 2014, p. 14.

5. Franklin Kolma, 'ABG Grants Second Mining License', *Post Courier*, 8 February 2018, <https://postcourier.com.pg/abg-grants-second-mining-license/>.

Francis Ona, a leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), (sixth from left) meets with a group of BRA guerillas at Guava village near the Panguna mine, central Bougainville, circa 1994



Photo credit: Ben Bohane/Australian War Memorial

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move Bougainville beyond a ‘colonial-capitalist system’? This paper will explore the notion of ‘good governance’ and its implications for Bougainville. It briefly discusses liberal-capitalist forms of governance and explores the potential for alternative approaches to governance in Bougainville that can effectively continue the struggle beyond the colonial-capitalist system.

‘Good’ governance

Governance is a relatively straightforward term that at its simplest refers to the way a government administers state processes, services and systems and makes decisions about the allocation of resources. ‘Good governance’, in combination with the rule of law and democracy, are seen to be essential to effective statehood. However, the concept of ‘good governance’ is a slippery one and is something that not only seems to defy clear definition, but some would argue it is a concept that has been used to discipline states to conform to the global capitalist system. For example, under the current global liberal democratic capitalist system, good governance means ensuring the conditions within which economic growth can thrive through enabling foreign direct investment, liberalisation of markets, and privatisation of services. Furthermore, in some instances such as Bougainville, capitalist good governance should facilitate possibilities for resource extraction by transforming land tenure laws. Indeed, this was the governance transformation being implemented by colonial powers in Bougainville that sparked the civil war. For example, Francis Ona argued the state of Papua New Guinea “is an instrument for the few rich to accumulate wealth...

the state is the instrument for the rich to suppress the suffering masses. The Parliament House in Port Moresby [capital city of Papua New Guinea] is nothing more than a central market place where the indigenous capitalists exchange large sums of money and make bargains for large foreign loans and investments for personal benefits in the name of national development”.⁶

Despite these difficulties with the concept, the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) nonetheless specifically refers to good governance, stating, “the actual date of the referendum will be set taking into account of standards of good governance”.⁷ In the BPA, ‘good governance’ is defined as including democracy, participation, transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. To complicate matters, although not officially stated in the BPA, some commentators nonetheless argue that ‘good governance’ in the context of Bougainville necessarily includes the ability to be economically self-reliant. Although the referendum would appear to be going ahead, thereby suggesting that the condition of ‘good governance’ has been met, it remains to be seen whether ‘good governance’ or lack thereof will be a factor in determining whether PNG will endorse a vote in favour of Bougainville independence should that be the outcome of the referendum vote.

In addition to the explicit policies and regulations of state governance in facilitating capitalist accumulation, Lasslett’s extensive work on state crime in Bougainville emphasises the co-existence of a hidden and shadowy underbelly of governance.⁸ This underside of governance consists of clientelism, corruption, bribery and misappropriation that ensure government policies serve the needs of particular corporate and economic interests. For example, Lasslett highlights how political leadership in Bougainville has been used to

6. Francis Ona, 29 November 1989, p. 3.

7. ‘Bougainville Peace Agreement’, 30 August 2001, p. 5.

8. Kristian Lasslett, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire: Rio Tinto, the War on Bougainville and Resistance to Mining* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

Ceremony in February 2018 recognising the granting of a mining exploration license in Tunania



Photo credit: Franklin Kolma/Post Courier

leverage resistance within landowning communities to have their own private companies awarded lucrative exploration licenses over mineral deposits on Bougainville. Furthermore, groups claiming to represent landowners are now partnering with investors to conduct mineral explorations and moderate elements within what was the BRA have refashioned themselves into a new class of entrepreneurs, working with dubious outside interests, to accumulate capital through a range of industries, ranging from scrap metal through to security services.

The point to be emphasised here is that far from being a transgression of good governance, this shadowy underbelly of liberal democratic governance is the ultimate support for the capitalist system. That is, “democracy, like freedom, becomes a purely nominal, pre-emptive, ‘fetishistic’ reference which ‘abounds in the mouths of our politicians’ so as to prevent articulation of alternative discourses – while everyone knows that it functions by undem-

ocratic means”.⁹ Or in other words, liberal democracy only allows us to choose what does not interfere with the sovereign interests of capital.¹⁰ Indeed, to actually take good governance seriously would undermine these particular economic interests.

Considering some options

This leads to the question of what kind of governance system should replace the existing liberal-democratic representative state? What might an alternative form of governance look like? Perhaps the typical alternative to this form of liberal-capitalist governance are calls for a more indigenous form of governance that respects the preservation of culture and nature. There are two apparent possibilities that come to mind here when thinking of an indigenous-based form of governance. The

9. Fabio Vighi, *On Zizek’s Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010).

10. *Ibid.*

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first is some sort of decentralised governance in which a multitude of local communities govern themselves without, or at least at a distance from, the state. This model of governance may be motivated by a replication of Bougainville during the years of the blockade and is a popular alternative advocated by various social movements including the Zapatista in Mexico and Gandhi's 'constructive program' in India. Typically, such models of governance are based on the premise that the state is an integral part of the colonial-capitalist system, and therefore undoing or overcoming the state is a key goal.

However, there are important problems with this position. Firstly, while the state is indeed an integral part of the colonial-capitalist system, it does not mean the state itself is the problem. Rather, as discussed earlier, liberal capitalism defines and deploys the state in a particular way. Therefore, a key governance challenge is how one can deploy the state in a different way that, for example, ensures equal distribution of services and resources and regulates the protection and value of culture and the commons. While indigenous culture can be used to draw out and highlight the contradictions of the colonial-capitalism system, it does not in any way mean that the 'solution' is indigenous-based governance. Indeed, we cannot ignore that one of the lessons from the decentralised, local 'commune' governance during the years of the blockade was that it did not lead to an enduring alternative to the colonial-capitalist system.

Another example of some relevance to Bougainville is the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia. Bolivia is a majority indigenous country that is dependent on export mining.

Morales' government has a base of support underpinned by indigenous social movements and its governance is framed around a discourse of decolonisation and living well.¹¹ In its eleven years in power, the government has made significant achievements, such as achieving the region's highest growth rate, tripling the size of the economy, reducing poverty by half, and reducing income inequality by one-fifth. However, as Farthing observes, "Nevertheless, the underlying economic structure remains largely untouched. While a new class of (often indigenous) traders and small miners has become wealthy, the traditional elites have not been displaced".¹² Furthermore, governance and politics has largely reverted back to that based on clientelism and political patronage.

Rethinking the possibilities

These examples emphasise the hard reality of what it means to implement an enduring governance alternative in the world of global capital. Indeed when such alternatives do emerge, they "encounter a hostile institution organized to frustrate its plans...the moment one is just perceived as a possible agent of such disturbance, tremendous forces are unleashed".¹³ Indeed, this was the experience of young activists in Bougainville who not only took action against the mine but openly advocated for different alternatives. Therefore, as Alain Badiou aptly explains, "the goal of all enemy propaganda is not to annihilate an existing force (this function is generally left to police forces), but rather to annihilate an unnoticed possibility of the situation".¹⁴

11. Linda Farthing, 'Between Party and Movements', *Jacobin*, 19 August 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/bolivia-morales-pink-tide-indigenous-lat-in-america>.

12. Ibid.

13. Costas Douzinas, 'The Left in Power? Notes on Syriza's Rise, Fall, and (Possible) Second Rise', *Near Futures Online*, March 2016, <http://nearfuturesonline.org/the-left-in-power-notes-on-syrias-rise-fall-and-possible-second-rise/#en-62-1>.

14. Alain Badiou, cited in Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), p. 57.

Therefore, we need to consider the forces preventing serious consideration of alternatives in Bougainville today. Lasslett's claim that the BPA reintroduced the structural violence that the struggle was seeking to overcome is important here. One could argue that the BPA serves as a form of enemy propaganda in that it exerts pressure on Bougainville to meet a certain set of conditions for governance, including, unofficially, the condition of economic self-reliance, if it wishes to obtain independence. Through this blackmail the BPA serves as the instrument through which the former and current colonial powers control and regulate the possibilities available to Bougainville. That is, Bougainville is guilty if they fail to meet the conditions for good governance, but also guilty if they do because that means giving up on their desire for an independent Bougainville beyond the colonial capitalist system.

What is to be done in this predicament? Perhaps what is required today to overcome this blackmail is not to escape from the state in favour of localised indigenous-based governance, nor to seek some hybrid form of governance that balances the limitations and excesses of both Western and indigenous governance. Rather, perhaps what is required in Bougainville today is a 'governmental event',¹⁵ of transforming the 'culture of governance' in Bougainville itself. Surprisingly, such an event in Bougainville today might assume the form of taking the concept of good governance more seriously than those who espouse it want it to be taken. That is, rather than simply dismissing the condition for good governance (including the addition of economic self-reliance) what if Bougainville accepted it fully as its own condition by actively working to rid the culture of governance in Bougainville of its shadowy underside. This would mean directly addressing the challenge of persistent clientelism, bribery and corruption and initiating democratic and transparent governance, particularly in the economic sphere.¹⁶ To be clear, the aim of shifting this shadowy underside is not to enable a pure liberal democratic governance, but rather to

move beyond such a model of governance.

Based on this approach a key question for Bougainville today is whether or not there are any concrete possibilities for such a transformation to take place. What is happening in Bougainville today that could trigger or enable a governmental event? Does a vote either way in the referendum provide concrete opportunities for a governmental event to occur? It would seem that a 'yes' to independence would not necessarily indicate a readiness to break free from liberal-capitalism any more than a 'no' vote would indicate a willingness to remain within it. Indeed, there is a certain ambiguity in the referendum: a decision either way provides no specific content or strategic direction for what comes next.

Somewhat controversially, perhaps one should consider the implications of the referendum for Papua New Guinea. For example, as Francis Ona observed, "The only significant development we have seen since independence [in PNG] is the widening gap between the few rich and the poor majority".¹⁷ Or, in the words of Blaise Iruinu, today "Papua New Guinea now has nowhere to go. Instead of surviving, she is dying. Borrow for investment, borrow for services, becomes a slave to the master".¹⁸ Therefore, what are the implications of a governmental event in Bougainville if it chooses to remain part of the Papua New Guinea state? Could it reverberate across the country to other provinces, delivering Papua New Guinea from its own failed independence?

15. Slavoj Zizek, *The Courage of Hopelessness* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

16. Indeed, one can learn from recent actions taken by the Governor of Oro Province in PNG, Gary Juffa, in which a group of foreign workers were arrested and heavy equipment seized after authorities shut down an illegal logging operation in the province. Juffa commented that the company was aided by a member of his own administration who provided fraudulent 'forest clearing' authorities (for example see <https://bit.ly/2JeEjXN>).

17. Francis Ona, 29 November 1989, p. 3.

18. Iruinu, B., Interview – The Panguna Seminars, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 25 August 2015.