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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ripples of Decolonisation in the Asia-Pacific

Charles Hawksley and Rowena Ward

University of Wollongong

Corresponding author: Dr Charles Hawksley, Senior Lecturer Political and International Studies, School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia.

Email: charlesh@uow.edu.au, Email: roward@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The process of decolonisation has had a profound effect on the structure of the international state system, including in the Asia Pacific. This article surveys the results of the decolonisation of the British, French, Dutch and Japanese Asian and Pacific empires. It also discusses the end of United Nations Trusteeships administered by the United States, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the governmental arrangements of other non-self-governing or dependent territories. With two Pacific territories, Bougainville (November 2019) and New Caledonia (August or September 2020), soon to vote on their political futures, it is timely to note that a process of self-determination does not always result in independence. The article shows that some territories have had their calls for independence ignored, while others enjoy high degrees of autonomy and self-government within nation states. In effect, this article, and the six papers included in this special edition, show that the process of decolonisation in the Asia Pacific has diverse economic, political and social impacts for sovereign states, as well as social and economic implications for individuals, including deportation, resettlement and ongoing struggles for self-determination. As such decolonisation was, is and will continue to be more than a political process.

Keywords:

Decolonisation; Independence; Asia Pacific; Japan; United Nations; Statehood; Trust Territories

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This special issue of *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* ‘Decolonisation: Ripples in the Asia Pacific,’ presents six articles on different aspects of empire and decolonisation.¹ This introductory essay places the six articles within the larger history of political movements towards statehood, sovereignty and independence. Given the upcoming November 2019 vote for the people of Bougainville on either autonomy within Papua New Guinea or independent statehood, and a second referendum in August or September 2020 for New Caledonia on either the maintenance of substantial autonomy or full independence from France, this issue is timely.

Independence is however just one possible result of decolonisation, and it is possible that an exercise in self-determination may decide that full independence is not the most appropriate option. While historically decolonisation has aimed to deliver independence, authors such as [Prinsen and Blaise \(2017\)](#) argue that political choices amounting to something less than independent statehood are now more likely, especially for small island territories, as the costs of independence might outweigh the apparent benefits. Different political and administrative trajectories, including free association with another state, or new forms of autonomy within states, are also possible. As detailed below, the Pacific Islands region exhibits an astonishing variety of alternatives to statehood.

As a political movement, decolonisation shook the world in the post-World War II (WWII) era and led directly to the creation of dozens of new states in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, mainland South America (Guyana and Suriname), and the Pacific. The signing of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill signalled the death knell of European colonial empires, and was the harbinger for the global expansion of the nation-state ideal and governmental model after WWII. The two leaders advanced several common principles, including their respect for ‘the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them’ ([‘Atlantic Charter’ 2019](#)). This principle was foundational to the United Nations, which fashioned the UN Trusteeship Council to give expression to this commitment, and imposed obligations on administering powers to prepare Trust Territories and their peoples for an independent future.

As the 1960 *UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* makes clear, independence was the intended outcome of decolonisation in the decades following WWII. The Preamble to the UN General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960 (‘the Declaration’) clearly states that colonialism is a blight on humanity, and serves to prevent human and global development:

Recognizing that the peoples of the world ardently desire the end of colonialism in all its manifestations, [and]

Convinced that the continued existence of colonialism prevents the development of international economic co-operation, impedes the social, cultural and economic development of dependent peoples and militates against the United Nations ideal of universal peace ... ([UNGA 1960](#))

¹ Most of the articles were presented originally at a University of Wollongong workshop, ‘Decolonisation, Sovereignty and Human Security in the Pacific Islands,’ 26–27 June 2018, which included academics from Japan, Fiji, the USA and Australia. Funding for the workshop was provided by the University of Wollongong’s International Committee.

Article 2 of the Declaration states that self-determination is the desired objective for all people, and a lack of development is insufficient reason to delay such a vote. Interestingly, the word ‘decolonisation’ is not used in the Declaration, but it quickly became synonymous with ‘The Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence of Colonial Countries and Peoples,’ created on 27 November 1961 following General Assembly Resolution (UNGAR 1654 of the XVI session) ([UNGA 1961](#)), and known colloquially as the ‘Special Committee on Decolonization’ or the ‘Committee of 24’ (or even ‘C-24’ from the original number of members). Along with the UN Trusteeship Council, the Special Committee on Decolonization has played a prominent role in the ‘collective decolonization’ of the world ([Mittelman 1976: 42](#)) by continuing to discuss the political independence of territories under the control of other powers through its annual discussions and maintenance of the list of Non-Self Governing Territories.

[UN News \(2007\)](#) notes that there were 72 Non-Self Governing Territories in 1945, and by the time of Nauru’s independence in 1968, the Special Committee was dealing with 37 territories, which included two of the original 11 UN Trust Territories (New Guinea, and the Pacific Islands), the others having already come to independence ([Mittelman 1976: 46](#)). At the time of writing this paper, seventeen territories are still under consideration, including six in the Pacific: American Samoa; French Polynesia; Guam; New Caledonia; Pitcairn; and Tokelau ([UNGA 2019](#)).

During the 1960s the business of the Special Committee was complicated by the non-compliance of administering powers who ‘persistently refused to acknowledge that various territories are within the scope of Chapter XI of the U. N. Charter’ ([Mittelman 1976: 46](#)). In discussing the Pacific Islands, Banivanua-Mar ([2016: 223](#)) makes the important point that some Indigenous peoples are locked out of discussions on decolonization through their integration into the national state as self-governing territories. While France attempted to evade the purview of the Special Committee, in 1986 independent Pacific Islands states were successful in having New Caledonia considered as a Non-Self Governing Territory ([Fisher 2019](#)). On 2 December 1986, and despite French objections, the General Assembly noted the ‘inalienable right of the people of New Caledonia to self-determination and independence in accord with resolutions 1514 (XV)’ ([UNGA 1986](#)).

Parts of the Asia Pacific are not included on the list, but this does not exclude them from histories of activism towards self-determination. West Papua is one example. However on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), a colony of Chile since 1888, an independence movement emerged in 1956 ([Crocombe 2001: 433](#)), and since 2014 there have been moves to have Easter Island placed on the agenda of the Special Committee on Decolonization ([Youkee 2017](#)). The people of the Australian Territory of Norfolk Island, who argue they are an indigenous Pacific people ([Gonschor 2017](#)), have taken their case to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to argue against Australia’s attempts to assert greater direct control over the territory ([OHCHR 2018](#)) and allege breaches of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 under Articles 1, 2, 25, 26 and 27.

Interestingly, not all votes for self-determination result in independence. Two votes on self-government for the estimated 1500 people of Tokelau (2006 and 2007) were rejected. In October 2007, 446 of the 692 people who voted chose self-government in free association with New Zealand; however, this was 16 votes short of the two-thirds majority required to trigger a shift in status ([UN News 2007](#)). The population of the UK’s sole remaining Pacific Territory,

Pitcairn Islands, is numbered in the dozens and has no desire for independence ([Crocombe 2001](#): 425).

France integrated all of its Pacific territories—French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and New Caledonia—into the French State in an effort to stave off independence movements, but this has not been entirely successful. The 1988 Matignon accords brokered a peace for New Caledonia, and the 1998 Noumea Accord set out a path for self-determination. The first of a possible three New Caledonian referenda was held in November 2018, and it resulted in a higher vote (56 percent) for remaining with France than for independence (44 percent). The Noumea Accord provides for a second vote, to be held in August or September 2020, and if necessary, a third ([Elections NC 2019](#)). New Caledonia enjoys a high degree of autonomy, and the Noumea Accord does not allow for the French state to resume any powers once devolved to the New Caledonian authorities. While the path is clear towards greater autonomy, it will be up to the eligible voting population to decide if independence is the preferred option. Until things change, the New Caledonian government has day-to-day powers and responsibility (*compétence*) for most aspects of government under organic law 969 of 3 August 2009, including the organisation of public services, working visas, public works, local public appointments, prices, taxes and tariffs. The French retains powers over, *inter alia*: nationality; justice, public order, defence, monetary and foreign affairs ([GNC nd](#): 7–9), albeit with a degree of consultation.

The ripples of empire, colonialism and decolonisation intersect in many lands, including in New Caledonia. Apart from the indigenous Kanak people, there are immigrants from Francophone Europe and Southeast Asia, along with migrant communities from Indonesia and Japan. Despite claims to ‘Liberte, egalite, fraternite’ not all have been treated equally. As Benjamin Ireland’s article in this volume shows, despite the best efforts of French authorities, the Japanese identity of the Nippo-Kanak community survived deportation, and the confiscation of property.

Japan’s expansionism from the late 19th century, and most significantly in the 1930s and 1940s, had an enormous influence on decolonisation in the Asia Pacific. Modern Japan incorporated Okinawa—which since at least the early 14th century had been the Ryūkyū kingdom, paying tribute to both the Satsuma Domain in southern Japan and imperial China ([Egami 1994](#): 828)—as a prefecture in 1879. Japan’s colonisation of Taiwan began in 1895. The annexation of the Korean peninsula in 1910 came five years after Japan made it a ‘protectorate.’ The legacies of the incorporation of all Koreans as Japanese citizens during the colonial period continues today with the descendants of the Koreans who moved to Japan at that time—often forcibly—living as *Zainichi* or Special Permanent Residents in Japan. The establishment of Manchukuo in 1932 was the impetus for Japan to leave the League of Nations in 1933.

After World War I (WWI) allied powers received Germany’s Pacific territories as League of Nations ‘C’ Class Mandates, which denoted areas ‘too savage, untutored or remote to be afforded any kind of meaningful autonomy’ ([Banivanua-Mar 2016](#): 91). Japan’s South Pacific Mandate covered the Micronesian islands north of the equator: modern Palau, Northern Marianas, Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands. Nauru, and Nauru’s phosphate, was administered by Australia on behalf of itself, New Zealand and Great Britain. New Zealand received Samoa, and Australia was awarded New Guinea. C class Mandates were administered as an integral part of the administering territory, and Japan encouraged migration to its Micronesian islands, many from Okinawa ([Crocombe 2001](#): 433). Japan’s Pacific territories, however, were captured by the USA during WWII, and later incorporated into the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Japanese who had settled in the Micronesian

empire were forced to relocate to Okinawa where they continue to experience diasporic mourning (see Suzuki in this issue).

The US invasion of Okinawa in April 1945 involved some of the bloodiest battles and highest death rates of civilians in any theatre of World War II. Japan's defeat and ultimate surrender on 15 August paved the way for the decolonisation of Korea, and the occupation of the Japanese home islands and Okinawa by allied Powers. Under the terms of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty Japan officially relinquished control of Taiwan, although it was not specified to which country ([Hara 2015](#)).

When Japan regained its sovereignty over the country's four main islands in 1952 under the terms of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, in line with Article 3 of the Treaty, Okinawa and neighbouring islands were placed under US trusteeship ([United Nations Treaty Collection 1952](#)). In reality, the US Trusteeship took the form of an occupation and it was not until 1972, in accordance with an agreement between then Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Satō and former US President Nixon that Okinawa reverted to Japanese sovereignty. The ongoing ripples of decolonisation are obvious here as the continued, controversial presence of over 26,000 US troops on Okinawa Prefecture acts as a means for some Okinawans to seek independence from both the USA and Japan (see Takahashi in this issue).

Japan's legacy affected other states in the Asia Pacific, often sponsoring independence at withdrawal. The Spanish were defeated in the Philippines in 1898 by a US force, which then annexed the country, prompting a bloody uprising against American rule, and only after the Japanese invasion did the Philippines gain its independence in 1946. Likewise, Indonesia's leaders had first proclaimed their independence on 17 August 1945, two days after the Japanese surrender. After conflict, several conferences and UN attempts to broker peace, in December 1949 most of the Netherlands East Indies formally became the Republic of Indonesia. The Dutch, however, held on to West Papua, aiming to deliver independence to its Melanesian people. Once a leader of the Third World movement, Indonesia became a colonial power as it expanded first into West Papua (see McKinlay-King in this issue), where Indonesia's oppression and manipulation of the 1969 'Act of Free Choice' sparked a resistance movement that continues to this day. Indonesia also expanded into Timor-Leste in 1975 following the Portuguese withdrawal. The ripples of decolonisation continued in Timor-Leste, through a 1999 vote on autonomy, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) of 1999–2002 and finally independence as the *República Democrática Timór-Leste* (Tetum) or *República Democrática de Timor-Leste* (Portuguese) from May 2002, with several UN support missions concentrating on building a culture of human rights protection for the new nation's police and military ([Hawksley & Georgeou 2016](#): 194–199).

The legacies of decolonisation are also evident in the structure of the Asia-Pacific nation-state system, and in the tensions that empire left behind. The dissolution of the British Raj resulted in the 1947 partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the first major act of post-war decolonisation that has echoes today in ongoing tensions over Kashmir. Independence for the Maldives came in 1965, and the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Burma (now Myanmar) became independent in 1948, as did Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and both states have experienced protracted internal conflict. Conflict and violence also engulfed Indo-China, independent from France in 1953 (Cambodia and Laos) and 1954 (North Vietnam), with two decades of war until the US departed South Vietnam in 1975. British decolonisation of its Far Eastern possessions led to conflict on the Malay peninsula. Britain's defeat in Singapore during WWII meant ethnic Chinese communists were the main opponents of the Japanese occupation of Malaya. When Britain proposed a

Malayan Federation in 1948 with greater powers for Malay sultans and citizenship restrictions for Chinese, the result was a communist insurgency that lasted until 1960 ([Calvocoressi 2001](#): 553). Eventually in 1957 the British managed to combine both the Federated Malay States and the unfederated Sultanates into the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, Singapore (independent from 1959), Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) joined into the new state of Malaysia; however Indonesian opposition to Malaysian state expansion on Borneo led to the 1963–1966 ‘Konfrontasi’ with Malaysia. Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965, and went on to form perhaps the world’s most successful city-state, while the oil-rich Sultanate of Brunei stayed out of Malaysia, and received self-government from Britain in 1971 and independence in 1984.

In the Pacific, Samoa was the first territory to attain independence, from New Zealand, in 1962. Cook Islands received full self-government from New Zealand in 1965, but remained in association. As Ron Crocombe ([2001](#): 433) notes, Cook Islands is ‘for practical purposes’ independent with control over foreign affairs, and immigration; however New Zealand manages its defence requirements. The people of Niue were offered independence by New Zealand in 1974, but chose instead self-government and free association.

Britain’s Pacific withdrawal commenced with Fiji and the Kingdom of Tonga in 1970. Tonga was a protected state of the British empire from 1900, and has the distinction of being the only Pacific territory not to be officially administered by another power. When Fiji became a British Crown colony in 1874 the population was *iTaukei* or ethnic Fijians; however migration from the Indian subcontinent changed the demographic balance and the consequences echo to this day through a series of military coups and constitutional changes designed to preserve the power of the *iTaukei*.

The largest Pacific Islands state, Papua New Guinea (PNG), achieved independence in 1975 from Australia. Australia’s Mandate of New Guinea became the UN Trust Territory of New Guinea after WWII, with the concomitant obligation to prepare the territory for independence. Australia administered the Trust Territory of New Guinea in combination with its Australian Territory of Papua from 1949–1973 when self-government for Papua New Guinea ensued, and independence two years later in 1975 ([Hawksley 2006](#): 161–163).

Solomon Islands was created from two European empires. A German protectorate existed in the North from 1885 covering Bougainville, Shortland Islands, Choiseul, Isabel, and Ontong Java, and a British protectorate existed from 1893 in the South over New Georgia, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira, to which Britain added Rennell and Belona, and the Santa Cruz Islands (Temotu) in 1898. With the exception of Bougainville, which remained part of German New Guinea, Germany transferred its claims to Britain in 1899 in the Treaty of Berlin, in exchange for Britain dropping its claims to Samoa. The British Protectorate of Solomon Islands became self-governing in 1976 and independent from Britain in 1978.

Independence came progressively to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, which Britain administered together, but which separated after a referendum in 1974. The Ellice Islands became Tuvalu in 1976, and the Gilbert Islands became Kiribati, which attained independence in 1979. The new state of Kiribati expanded its geographic reach with the Kiribati-US Treaty of Tarawa, which extended the sovereignty of the new state over the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands in 1983.

Decolonisation came to Vanuatu in 1980. Under a 1906 agreement Britain and France jointly governed the islands of the New Hebrides in that rare colonial arrangement, a condominium. This arrangement created two separate colonial administrations ([Woodward](#)

[2014](#): 70) and produced constant competition for influence that has consequences today, with some regions speaking French and others English ([Crocombe 2001](#): 418), and both European languages joining Bislama as Vanuatu's official languages (see Ward in this issue).

Nauruans had been used as forced labour by the Japanese during WWII but post-war the Australian administration brought in labour from other parts of the Pacific, in the process helping to consolidate a Nauruan identity. The UN Trusteeship of Nauru ended in 1968 when Nauruans set up 'the world's smallest republic' ([Crocombe 2001](#): 426). The US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was different to all other Trusteeships in that it required Security Council, rather than General Assembly, permission to terminate ([OMSN 1984](#): 59). Gradually and progressively the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was dismantled from 1979 with the independence of Marshall Islands, and then in 1986, with the Compact of Free Association for Chuuk, Yap, Kosrae, and Pohnpei that set up the Federated States of Micronesia. Palau became a separate Republic in 1994. The USA's other Pacific possessions—American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and Guam—are technically unincorporated US territories. Those living in Guam and CNMI are US citizens, but those from American Samoa are US nationals. Governmental arrangements vary but all inhabitants of US Pacific Territories can travel to the US without visas, which is useful for work (especially military) and education.

Independence carries with it the full duties of statehood and concomitant international responsibilities. Even before the independence of PNG in 1975, Bougainville had opted out ([Hawksley 2006](#): 166). Following a decade of civil war (1988–1998) and two decades of autonomous rule, the people of Bougainville will vote in November 2019 on whether to maintain their present arrangements as the Autonomous Region of Bougainville within Papua New Guinea, or to move towards full independence. Like New Caledonia, the Government of Bougainville already enjoys substantial autonomy over mining, oil and gas, and while the PNG state retains powers over international relations it must consult the Bougainville government if it is affected ([Wolfers 2014](#): 119–120). Given the Panguna mine was a contributing factor to the initial conflict, sources of income for an independent state may be a factor in this vote as diversifying the economic base of Pacific Islands countries is no simple task. Even after legal decolonization colonial economic relations continue to limit the possible economic choices of independent states ([Mittelman 1976](#): 43). Forty years on from independence in Solomon Islands, unfinished wood products remain the main export, and with a growing population and expanding urbanisation, food security is becoming a pressing concern for Solomon Islands. In a sense, Solomon Islands was recently 're-colonised' with fourteen years of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–2017) reimposing control after tensions over employment, land and opportunities had disrupted social life. RAMSI was predominantly a policing mission, but its 'whole of government' approach had significant effects on the level of sovereignty for Solomon Islands leaders, and Australia was particularly sensitive to accusations of neo-colonialism and usually involved other members of the Pacific Islands Forum in RAMSI's operations ([Hawksley & Georgeou 2016](#): 199–203).

As a political process decolonisation has affected trade, migration, culture, aid, development, regional association, state cooperation, skills transfers, education and training. The articles in this volume explore some of these issues against a background where the outcomes of self-determination are not as clear as they once were.

The six essays discuss a variety of issues related to decolonisation. Benjamin Ireland explores the different legal positions within New Caledonia of the children born to Japanese and indigenous Melanesians, the 'Nippo-Kanaks,' both during and after WWII. He provides an

indication of how French state power had dramatic effects on the lives of people, forcing them to be removed from a territory and never to return. Ireland's essay focuses on letters from a Japanese father as remembered by his daughter, letters that had to be burnt so as not to attract the ire of her mother's new husband. Ireland's exploration of the experiences of Nippo-Kanak children and their engagement with Japanese culture is a reminder of the resilience of familial ties when confronted with legal discrimination.

Whilst Ireland considers those who were left behind, Taku Suzuki focuses on those who were forced to leave. Suzuki's Okinawan subjects show the complexities of migration during both the colonial and decolonisation periods. The migrants Suzuki discusses are not only the product of Japan's colonisation of Okinawa; they were also encouraged to migrate to Japan's mandate of Micronesia and as such became members of a colonising population. However, after the battles in the Western Pacific in 1944, they were forced to return to Okinawa where they became 'internal strangers' ([Lubkemann 2002](#): 76). Suzuki argues, through a discussion of the repatriates' pilgrimages back to Micronesia, for an *irei* (a ritual to pacify or console the spirits/souls of the dead) that these colonial migrants should be considered as diasporic migrants.

Shinnosuke Takahashi discusses the life experiences of two members—Toshio Takahashi and Yeongja Yu—of *Okikan Minshūrentai* or Okinawa-Korea People's Solidarity (OKPS), to demonstrate the importance of considering translocal space in Japan's post-war civil movements. Neither Toshio Takahashi nor Yeongja Yu are originally from Okinawa, and in a location that has undergone colonisation and reversion to Japanese rule, outsiders—whether those from the Japanese mainland or from other locations—are often deliberately or accidentally ignored. However, Takahashi shows, through his examination of the narratives of the lives of people such as Takahashi and Yu, that their presence can encourage reflection about representations of who was and is a colonising and colonised people.

Turning to West Papua's experience of flawed decolonisation, McKinlay-King's article raises disturbing questions as to the collusion of the UN Secretariat in the transfer of sovereignty from the Netherlands to Indonesia. Drawing on archival sources, this article shows UN and US acceptance of Indonesia's take over as a *fait accompli*, and the 1969 Act of Free Choice as a farce. Given the global shift towards state sovereignty entailing responsibility for the welfare of a population, and the history of the Indonesian military's human rights abuses in West Papua, the article provides grounds for revisiting the legal process of the incorporation of West Papua into Indonesia, which could be done by reviving the Trusteeship Council.

Rowena Ward's article explores the language choices made by independent states across the Asia Pacific including in Indonesia, Timor Leste, Fiji, and Vanuatu to demonstrate that language selection is as much a political as a practical matter. The decision to adopt or reject the language of the administrative power may have consequences for future aid and development, as well as for national unity and the future. With Bougainville and New Caledonia facing future votes, the question of which official or national languages to use may need to be considered in the near future.

Finally, Georgeou, Hawksley, Monks and Ki'i's article explores agriculture and asset creation as economic development in Solomon Islands in its independent period. The authors map the points of origin of produce at Honiara Central Market, and calculate returns from agricultural production for producer-vendors, in order to provide an insight into food security, a matter of critical importance to many Pacific societies affected by population increase, urbanisation, climate change and rising seas levels. They point out that a plan for Solomon

island development under RAMSI (the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) involved boosting agricultural exports, but neglected local agricultural development by producer-vendors, whose market production and sale leads to asset creation and enhances food security and nutrition.

Taken together the six articles show some of the political, social, economic and cultural effects of empire and decolonisation in the new states where formal political independence ensued after WWII, as well as in those territories that are yet to vote on their future. They highlight how decolonisation was, is and will continue to be far more than a political process.

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