

NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE IN WEST PAPUA: “WE HAVE A HOPE”

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Summary

A nonviolent struggle for self-determination has been occurring in West Papua, an Indonesian colony located on the Western rim of the Pacific. A previous Dutch colonial outpost that Indonesia took control of in 1963, West Papua has been the scene of one of the most protracted, complex, and volatile conflicts in the Pacific. The nonviolent struggle in West Papua has rarely been noticed or analyzed in depth by West Papuan scholars whose inquiries have focused on conventional politicking and armed resistance. Nor has nonviolent struggle in West Papua been investigated by those conducting research into the dynamics of nonviolent action. The nonviolent struggle for self-determination in West Papua has also received little sustained analytical attention from domestic Indonesia media outlets adding to widespread Indonesian ignorance about the causes of West Papuan grievances. A banning on foreign journalists traveling to West Papua has further contributed to West Papua’s marginalization in the international press. Since 1998 resistance has been transformed from a low-level armed struggle in the mountains and jungles to a popular nonviolent movement waged in the cities and towns of West Papua. The movement has built on the oppositional consciousness developed during the 1970s and 1980s, has established organizational strength, and has intensified its nonviolent action against the Indonesian Government — enjoying some important successes along the way, which have required great persistence in the face of considerable repression by the Indonesian security forces. Critically, the movement has also taken the important strategic step of expanding the site of struggle to the international domain. Nonetheless, in addition to external factors affecting movement

trajectories and outcomes, the nonviolent struggle in West Papua faces substantial internal challenges. There is an important role for strategy in addressing these.

1. Introduction

West Papua is a remote, rugged and heavily forested territory located on the Western rim of the Pacific, bordering the independent state of Papua New Guinea and controlled by the Indonesian State since the 1st of May 1963. West Papuan resistance to foreign occupation has assumed both violent and nonviolent forms, though there has been much less scholarly and media attention on the latter. It is a struggle that dates back to unarmed oppositional movements against Japanese and Dutch colonialism in the 1930s and 1940s that included tax resistance, defiance of bans on traditional singing, dancing and cultural practices, and non-cooperation with forced labor programs. After the fall of Indonesian dictator Suharto in May 1998, the popular struggle for self-determination in West Papua entered a new phase of openness and intensity, characterized by the formation of new political and civil society organizations and the mass participation of ordinary West Papuans. Since 1998 West Papuans have also taken the important strategic step of expanding the sites of struggle beyond West Papua to include Indonesia and the international community.

This chapter analyzes the West Papuan struggle from the perspective of nonviolent action theory and the strategic principles of nonviolent conflict. I begin by discussing the historical background, root causes of the conflict, and the sources of Indonesia's power in the territory. Armed resistance to Indonesian rule is discussed and contemporary nonviolent struggle against the Indonesian State is examined. The final section analyzes some of the possible ways forward for the movement from a strategic standpoint.

2. Historical Background

In 1848, The Netherlands Government in agreement with the Germans and the British partitioned the island of New Guinea in two, along the 141st meridian east of Greenwich, although it was not until some fifty years later that the Dutch established a more permanent base in the territory. While in other parts of the Dutch East Indies the Dutch maintained their control over the colonized territories by working with pre-existing local indigenous institutions and leaders, in West Papua they chose not to do this. Instead the Dutch operated a kind of ‘dual colonialism’ with a second layer of administration run by Indonesian migrants brought in from other parts of the archipelago. While this experience deepened Indonesians’ sense of nationalism and attachment to a State that included all of the former Dutch East Indies, the presence of migrants from Ambon, Sulawesi, Java and elsewhere who ran the day-to-day affairs of the country was a source of great resentment to West Papuans.

After the Indonesians gained independence in 1949, the Dutch retained control of the territory, arguing that West Papua (or "Netherlands New Guinea" and later "Nieuw Guinea" as it was then called by the Dutch) was a distinct political entity from other parts of the Indonesian Republic with no significant administrative, historical or cultural connection to the rest of the Indonesian archipelago. This claim was vehemently

rejected by Indonesian representatives to the United Nations who insisted that West Irian (as it was then called by the Indonesians) was part and parcel of a united Indonesia that included all the former Dutch East Indies.

Few West Papuans, however, advocated integration with Indonesia and during the 1950s the Dutch colonial Government belatedly started to prepare West Papuans for self-government. Encouraged and supported by the Dutch, a small but fervent indigenous pro-independence nationalist movement took root. In 1961 Papuans were inducted into a national legislature. On December 1st 1961 national symbols of an embryonic State were formally adopted. *Hai Tanahku Papua* (Oh my Land of Papua) became the national anthem, the name *Papua Barat* (West Papua) was agreed upon, and the West Papuan national flag, known as the Morning Star, was unveiled. Although West Papuans stopped short of declaring independence, many West Papuans regard the 1st of December as their national day.

The Indonesian Government, however, maintained that these were just holding actions, feeble attempts by the Dutch to fan the embers of a dying colonial empire. In response, and with financial support from the Russians, Indonesian President Sukarno launched a sustained diplomatic campaign backed up by small scale military operations. A contingent of Indonesian paratroopers infiltrated the territory but was quickly rounded up by West Papuans and the Dutch. It was the height of the Cold War, and, anxious about the left leaning Sukarno's relationship with the Soviet Union, U.S. President John F. Kennedy's administration stepped into the fray to broker a deal between the Indonesian and Dutch governments. The subsequent 1962 New York Agreement stipulated that Netherlands New Guinea would be handed over to the United Nations to administer. Eight months later on the 1st of May 1963 the U.N. transferred administration to the Government of Indonesia. In doing so, the U.N. was following the successor state principle, *Uti possidetis juris* — that is, the understanding that decolonization would not change the borders established by the colonial power — which for better or worse guided much of the post-war decolonization process. West Papuans, however, were neither consulted nor involved in this process.

Although fundamentally undemocratic, the New York Agreement did give the West Papuans certain rights. These included freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association. Most importantly, the Agreement required that an act of self-determination “in accordance with international practice” would occur no later than six years after Indonesia took control. While “in accordance with international practice” was not defined in the New York Agreement, West Papuan activists at the time believed that it meant a referendum carried out in accordance with the principles of universal suffrage. Leading up to the “Act of Free Choice”, as the act of self-determination was known, the Government of Indonesia, according to Saltford and also Drooglever — in full knowledge of the international community — bombed West Papuan villages from the air, strafed West Papuans with machine-gun fire, detained dissidents without trial, and tortured, executed or managed the disappearance of those who dissented against Indonesian control.

Convinced that West Papua had already been returned to the fold of the motherland and determined not to allow a plebiscite, Jakarta argued that due to the difficult terrain and

the lack of political and economic development in the territory, universal suffrage was neither possible nor appropriate. Members of the Indonesian Government claimed that West Papuans were “too primitive” or “too stupid” for universal suffrage. (*This is despite the fact that in 1971, less than 2 years after the “Act of Free Choice”, the Government of Indonesia was insisting that West Papuans participate in general elections based on universal suffrage. A few years later in 1975 the international community was insisting on universal suffrage as part of the transfer of sovereignty in neighboring Australian controlled New Guinea, a territory that had almost identical social, political, and economic conditions as West Papua.*) A compromise position was proposed by the U.N. chief representative in West Papua, Bolivian Diplomat Ortiz Sanz, who recommended a “mixed method” that would include voting in the urban areas and “collective consultation” in the rural areas. Eventually, however, even the mixed method – which it could be argued violated the terms of the New York Agreement – was rejected by the Indonesian Government in favor of what the Indonesians called *musywarah* or “collective consultation”.

The “consultation” that followed was an orchestrated affair. Indonesian authorities handpicked participants with one late addition (less than 0.2% of the population), and interned them in camps. The process of selecting participants for the “Act of Free Choice” was not observed by the United Nations, the independent observers or the international press. In a series of “consultations” spanning over a couple of months, 100% of the 1022 Papuans (4 were sick and did not participate) who participated in the Act of Free Choice indicated their desire to remain with Indonesia. But there was no vote. Instead, after a presentation by an Indonesian military official and a few rehearsed speeches by West Papuans, those selected were simply asked to raise their hands if they wanted to remain with Indonesia.

In his final report to the U.N. Ortiz Sanz expressed a number of reservations. These included evidence of violent intimidation by Indonesian security forces, failure to adhere to a number of the Articles of the New York Agreement, and irregularities in the conduct of the Act of Free Choice. In addition there were protests in West Papua from West Papuans themselves and some members of the United Nations General Assembly – notably a delegation of 15 African states led by Ghana – also objected to the manner in which the Act of Free Choice was carried out. However, all this was to no avail. On the 19th of November 1969, the United Nations General Assembly “took note” of the results of the Act of Free Choice and West Papua was formally integrated into the territory of Indonesia and removed from the list of non-self-governing territories awaiting decolonization.

The United Nations Under-Secretary at that time, C.V Narasimhan, later observed that the whole process “was just a whitewash”. “The mood at the U.N. was to get rid of this problem as quickly as possible.... Nobody gave a thought to the fact that a million people had their fundamental rights trampled”, he said.

3. Root Causes of the Conflict in West Papua

Since the Act of Free Choice, conflict and violence in West Papua has persisted. These causes are multiple and varied. They include not only ongoing dispute over historical

grievances but also direct violence caused by a history and continuation of state-sanctioned human rights violations, military operations, and a culture of impunity. In addition there is chronic indigenous disadvantage in the areas of health, education and welfare caused by a combination of state neglect and socially, culturally and environmentally destructive large-scale development projects.

Conflict caused by economic exploitation is made worse by the Indonesian military's predatory role in the economy. Some seventy to eighty percent of the Indonesian military's (or TNI) budget comes from the TNI's involvement in legal and illegal business, including the provision of security to transnational corporations, giving the military a vested interest in maintaining conflict. Since the TNI's partial withdrawal from Aceh (another province in Indonesia where there has been a secessionist movement), following the Helsinki peace agreement, West Papua has become even more important to the TNI.

West Papua's abundant natural resources and an Indonesian State's transmigration program designed to foster national unity and development has also altered the demographic of West Papua. Far from helping, however, to realize the Indonesian State's modernization agenda, increased migration has intensified conflict and competition over land and economic opportunity. Institutional racism further exacerbates indigenous exclusion from widespread participation in the structures of the society, and it functions to help justify direct violence.

These prevailing historical causes and the direct, structural and cultural forms of violence in West Papua are mutually reinforcing, making the conflict extremely resistant to resolution.

4. The Sources of the Indonesian Government's Power in West Papua

The Indonesian Government maintains power in West Papua in seven key ways.

Firstly, and most importantly, the Indonesian Government would not be able to maintain control of the territory without the Indonesian military, the TNI whose presence in West Papua is ubiquitous. Former Australian intelligence analyst and academic based at the University of NSW, Clinton Fernandes, said in 2006 that troop numbers in West Papua can be “estimated at 25,000 and rising”. Fernandes went on to add that given West Papua's population is 2.5million [indigenous and non-indigenous], there is at least one security person for every 100 civilians. To put this in perspective, it is a much higher ratio than that prevailing in the US-led occupation of Iraq, where there is one coalition soldier (including mercenaries) for every 140 Iraqi civilians.

The TNI's willingness to use violence to quell dissent has functioned to both increase indigenous resistance to Indonesian rule and simultaneously repress movements for change.

Secondly, violence and exploitation of the indigenous population in West Papua has been kept largely hidden from the outside world due to the fact that the Indonesian Government has closed the territory off to sustained international scrutiny. Foreign

journalists, humanitarian organizations and even international diplomats are routinely denied permission to visit the territory, particularly areas where there are military operations.

Thirdly, West Papua occupies a central place in Indonesia’s national imagination. West Papua was the site of what Indonesians view as a culmination of a long and ultimately successful struggle against Dutch colonialism. Still smarting from the “loss” of East Timor and fearful of a foreign conspiracy that covets West Papua’s natural resource wealth, the overwhelming majority of ordinary Indonesians believe that West Papua is a rightful part of Indonesia. Determination to retain West Papua “at all costs” unifies Indonesian opposition to West Papuan claims for independence.

Fourthly, the Indonesian Government controls large-scale economic development in the province, particularly in the mining sector. The Freeport Rio Tinto gold and copper mine for instance, the worlds largest open cut mine and world’s largest gold deposit, is the Indonesian Government’s largest tax payer.

Fifthly, in addition to the use of repression as a tool of control, the Indonesian Government maintains its authority through a montage of confusing and contradictory policies that have functioned to undermine opposition by playing West Papuans against one another. The key central government institutions that formulate policy in West Papua include not only key ministers, cabinet and the various committees of national parliament (based in Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital), but also the State Intelligence Agency (BIN – *Badan Intel Nasional*) and the National Resilience Institute (Lemhannas).

However, it is not just those in Jakarta who determine policy and carry out the functions of the State. West Papuans themselves are in key positions of authority in West Papua. In fact the positions of Governor and *Bupati* (Mayor) in West Papua are all held by indigenous West Papuans. A number of *Bupatis*, notably the *Bupati* from the Star Mountains and Wamena, have been embroiled in serious corruption allegations. In addition all 42 representatives of the *Majelis Rakyat Papua*, a kind of indigenous upper house that advises the central government on policy, are indigenous West Papuans drawn from the Church, traditional leaders, and women’s groups. Ruling through local political structures run by indigenous West Papuans is the sixth way the Indonesian Government maintains control of the territory.

Finally, and critically, the Indonesian Government’s legitimacy and ability to rule in West Papua is heavily dependent on external sources of power: political, economic and military support willingly provided by the Indonesian Government’s elite allies and the domestic constituencies in the societies of Indonesia’s elite allies. Unlike the British occupation of India, where the British depended on Indian consent and cooperation to govern India, for instance, the Indonesian Government, the TNI and the large multinational corporations operating in West Papua simply do not need the skills and knowledge of ordinary West Papuans to run the day-to-day affairs of the territory.

This fact has not been lost on West Papuans. West Papuan activist Thom Beanal rhetorically asks: “Could it be that the Indonesian government is drawn to Irian Jaya [(the former name of West Papua)] not by its people but by its natural resources?”

However, although an invader may not be dependent on the people they dominate to run the day-to-day affairs of a territory, they are always dependent. In the case of West Papua the Indonesian Government is heavily dependent on external support: the diplomatic, economic and military support of its elite allies. These international and national elite allies operate in ways that mutually reinforce one another's actions. Diplomatically, Indonesia relies on member states of the United Nations to maintain the fiction that the transfer of sovereignty in West Papua was free and fair. Economically, Indonesia depends on the continued investment of multinational corporations (particularly in the oil, gas and mining sectors) as well as the continued economic support of the IMF and World Bank through the Consultative Group on Indonesia. Militarily, Indonesia depends upon countries like the United States to arm and train the TNI, legitimize the role of the TNI in protecting the territorial integrity of Indonesia, and to secure a stable environment for investment. In turn, the Indonesian Government's elite allies (like the United States, Australia, members of the European Union, and Japan) depend on the active and passive consent of local constituencies such as voters, bureaucrats, workers, intellectuals, journalists and public opinion makers, shareholders, superannuants (pension fund holders), and unions, to maintain support for Indonesia's occupation of West Papua.

The Indonesian Government's dependence on international allies and their domestic constituencies, means that even if the overwhelming majority of indigenous West Papuans were able to organize and sustain a mass withdraw of their consent and cooperation, by itself such action would not be sufficient to leverage Jakarta to make political concessions. This insight has important implications for developing an effective nonviolent strategy.

5. Armed Resistance to Indonesian Rule in West Papua

Armed resistance to Indonesian rule occurred almost immediately after Indonesia took administrative control of the province. Between 1963 when Indonesia formerly established their presence in the territory and 1998 when ex-Indonesian President Suharto was overthrown by a political reform movement led largely by students, West Papua was the scene of ongoing military operations by the Indonesian Army. Guerrilla fighters in West Papua are often referred to as the OPM (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka – The Free Papua Movement*). The phrase OPM, however, is problematic and often misleading given that West Papuans themselves often associate all resistance to Indonesian rule with the OPM, whether that resistance is violent or nonviolent. The acronym “OPM” is also simultaneously understood by West Papuans to be both a slogan and the identity of those who resist Indonesian rule. Indeed it is not uncommon to hear West Papuans say “we are all OPM”.

Partly to clarify this confusion the armed wing of the OPM, the origins of which date back to the Kebar uprising led by Ferry Awom in 1965, later became re-organized and known as the TPN-PB (*Tentara Pembebasan Nasional – Papua Barat – The National Liberation Army of West Papua*) which consists of a loose network of decentralized commands throughout West Papua. The TPN-PB has an estimated active fighting force of fewer than one thousand men with even fewer modern weapons. Many of the guerrillas are armed with traditional weapons — spears, bows and arrows. The TPN-PB has conducted low-level attacks against Indonesian military personnel, launched raids

on weapons and ammunition depots, attacked resource extractive industries — the most notable of which was the blowing up of the Freeport gold and copper mine’s slurry pipeline in 1977, and engaged in acts of kidnapping (such as the 1996 kidnapping of a team of foreign researchers and the 1998 kidnapping of two Belgium film makers). Never posing a serious military threat to Indonesian rule, the TPN-PB has also been severely hampered by rivalry and factionalism, the most severe of which was a spat between Jacob Prai and Seth Rumkorem in 1976.

In 2002 at a Peace Conference in West Papua organized by West Papuan human rights groups and civil society, the various TPN-PB commands, who over a number of years had been in contact with civil society activists working to unify resistance to Indonesian rule, agreed to support the nonviolent struggle but reserved the right to armed self-defense if attacked. This commitment was restated at a number of subsequent clandestine meetings. Although there have been few military operations by the TPN-PB since 1998, the policy of supporting nonviolent struggle and not engaging in offensive operations is contested by some commanders. The TPN-PB, long riven by factionalism, personality disputes, poor discipline, collaboration with Indonesian security forces, coupled with a Melanesian culture of authoritarian “big men” politics, has to date been unable to develop a unified command structure or pose a serious military threat to Indonesian rule.

There is no questioning the key role the armed struggle has played. Guerrilla warfare in West Papua has helped keep alive the hopes of many West Papuans to be “rulers in their own land”. The armed struggle’s intimate knowledge of the territory’s remote and rugged terrain and close relationship with local populations has made it virtually impossible for the Indonesian military to achieve a decisive military victory. While the political causes of the conflict remain unresolved, it is highly likely that at least some TPN-PB forces will continue to wage a low level guerrilla war for national liberation.

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Biographical Sketch

Jason MacLeod has worked as a community development worker, nonviolent activist and conflict transformation trainer in a range of settings in Australia and internationally. He is currently based at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS) at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia where he is completing a PhD on the nonviolent struggle in West Papua. His writing has been published in *New Matilda*, *New Internationalist*, *Arena*, *Inside Indonesia*, *Social Alternatives*, *Green Left*

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