

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 31 October 2019

The Papua Question: Historical Contexts and International Dimensions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In August and September 2019, there were demonstrations and riots in Papua¹ organized by pro-independence groups demanding a referendum. These were triggered by an attack on Papuan students by an Indonesian mob in Surabaya, which led to violent unrest which spread quickly and left many dead or wounded.
- Some have raised the prospect of Papua going the way of East Timor, but the two situations are significantly different. Indonesia's annexation of East Timor during Suharto's rule was never recognized by the UN, whereas Papua was recognized by the UN as part of Indonesian territory in 1969.
- Opposition to Indonesian rule has simmered ever since Papua was incorporated into Indonesia, but it became more energized by the greater democratic space in the post-Suharto era. As more Papuan youths received better education, they became more politicized.
- Papuan nationalists have made some progress in internationalizing the Papuan problem, particularly in gaining support from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) countries, which in turn have raised the Papuan issue at the UN annually.
- Political unrest and controversy over human rights violations arising from the Papuan question will be a difficult challenge for President Jokowi during his second term. However, the prospects for West Papuan independence appear to be bleak. Papua is low on the international community's agenda, the Papuans are divided, and in the unlikely event of a self-determination exercise, the growing numbers of non-Papuan migrants in the province would be a huge obstacle.

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INTRODUCTION

On 19 August 2019, a demonstration in Manokwari, West Papua province, turned riotous. The local government building was burnt down, cars torched, and shops and properties damaged. It was followed by similar incidents in other parts of Papua, resulting in many casualties. The Indonesian authorities used force to control the situation and restore an appearance of normalcy. However, on 23 September, a more serious riot erupted in Wamena. Government buildings, shops and cars were set on fire, and non-Papuans were attacked. As many as 32 died in the violence, and 77 others were wounded.² The situation was brought under control after Jakarta sent in 6,000 additional security force personnel.³

The Papuan riots were caused by an incident in Surabaya on 16 August during which Papuan students were abused and attacked by an Indonesian mob linked to the military and to radical Islamist associations. It was reported that the Papuan students in Surabaya had refused to fly the Indonesian flag on the Indonesian independence day. They were attacked and called “monkey”. Videos of the incident were disseminated through social media, and it was these which triggered the riots in Papua.

In fact, before the event in Surabaya, Papuan students in Malang had on 15 August demonstrated at the Mayor’s office. They were celebrating the 1962 New York Agreement on Papua. In that agreement, the Dutch agreed to transfer Dutch New Guinea (the name of Papua then) to Indonesia subject to a referendum. The students argued that the 1969 Act of Free Choice was not a referendum and hence they were now appealing to Indonesia to redo it. The Papuans felt that they were victims of Indonesian racism and therefore wished for independence from Indonesia.

This paper examines the origins of the Papuan question, the attitudes of the regional and international actors involved, especially the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the United Nations, and also its prospects.

UN RECOGNITION OF THE ACT OF FREE CHOICE

Indonesian nationalists declared the birth of the Republic of Indonesia on 17 August 1945, a country encompassing the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch refused to acknowledge the independence of Indonesia until December 1949 when the Round Table agreement was signed. In that agreement, the sovereignty of the Dutch East Indies was transferred to Indonesia, except for Dutch New Guinea, which the Dutch would consider separately one year later. Indonesian-Dutch relations quickly turned sour, however, because the Dutch were instead planning to prepare the Papuans for self-rule and refusing to negotiate with Indonesia.

On 1 December 1961, while still under the Dutch rule, the Dutch New Guinea Council voted “to rename the territory West Papua with a national anthem and a flag which flew alongside the Dutch tricolour.” Papuans were promised the right of self-determination.⁴ Indonesian nationalists saw this as a violation of the agreement and on 19 December 1949, Sukarno began the “liberation of West Irian.”⁵ Troops were sent into Papua. Mediation by US President John Kennedy’s brother resulted in the signing of the New York agreement on 15 August 1962 between Indonesia and the Netherlands. The Dutch agreed to transfer the

territory to UN interim administration on 1 October 1962, which would then turn it over to Indonesia by 1 May 1963.⁶ At the same time, Jakarta would be required before the end of 1969, to conduct an act of free choice in Papua to see whether the Papuans wished to remain in Indonesia.⁷ Papua has therefore in reality been under Indonesian rule since 1 May 1963.

The leftwing Sukarno government was overthrown in 1965 and the rightwing Suharto government came to power. Prior to the act of free choice, Suharto's Indonesia had in 1967 signed contracts with American companies to develop gold and other mining projects in Papua. Between 14 July and 2 August 1969 the act of free choice for Papua was conducted. The method used was not by popular vote but vote by 1,022 representatives through various Papuan councils.⁸ This was agreed upon by the UN representatives. The result was that Papua was to remain part of Indonesia.

On 6 November, UN secretary general U Thant presented his report on the Act at the UNGA (United Nations General Assembly). This was followed by the reports of an UN representative and an Indonesian representative. Debates followed at the end of which six countries (Belgium, Indonesia, Luxemburg, Malaysia, the Netherlands and Thailand) tabled a proposal to accept the integration of Papua into Indonesia. Many African countries refused to accept the proposal in disagreement over the way the Act of Free Choice was conducted.

Two revised proposals were submitted to deny the Indonesian claim to West Papua. On 19 November voting on the issue was conducted in the UNGA. The first proposal was made by the Republic of Dahomey calling for an adjournment to allow for further consultation on the Act of Free Choice. This was rejected by 58 to 31, with 24 abstentions. The second was submitted by Ghana, suggesting that a new Act of Free Choice be conducted by the end of 1975. This was also rejected, by 60 to 15, with 39 abstentions. Finally, the original proposal put forth by the six countries was put to a vote. This was supported by 134 to 0, with 30 abstentions.⁹ With that, Papua officially became a territory of the Republic of Indonesia.

OPPOSITION TO INDONESIA

In 1965, Papuan nationalists had established the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM, the Free Papua Organization), complete with a military wing to oppose Indonesian rule. They proved ineffective under Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) which did not tolerate dissent. Only after the fall of Suharto, under the democratic system, did Papuan opposition begin to grow. This has grown stronger with the rise in the educational level of the Papuans. It is presently headed by Benny Wenda, who is the chairman of the "United Liberation Movement for West Papua" (ULMWP) based in United Kingdom,¹⁰ and is supported by groups such as Komite Nasional Papua Barat (KNPB, National Committee of West Papua), and Aliansi Mahasiswa Papua (AMP, Papua Students Alliance). These are the intellectual wings of the Papua movement, and have been collaborated with old organizations in Papua such as Dewan Adat Papua (Papua Adat Council). The Forum Rakyat Indonesia untuk West Papua (FRI-WP) is also involved, consisting of Indonesian activists who supported self-determination for Papuans.¹¹

Papuan nationalists are calling for a re-examination of their history of decolonization. They want the UNGA to pressure Indonesia to re-conduct the referendum as they do not consider the 1969 Act of Free Choice to be a "genuine referendum". They have asked the Pacific

Island Forum (PIF) Countries to help their cause. An ardent supporter of West Papuan independence is Vanuatu, a member of PIF. Benny Wenda is reportedly supported by Vanuatu and he has been able to establish the ULMWP there. He also joined the Vanuatu delegation in 2019 to attend the UNGA but was barred from entering as he is a British citizen.¹² In fact, the year 2016 saw the peak of diplomatic efforts by PIF countries to champion the West Papuan cause at the UNGA. They urged the UN to investigate Indonesian human rights violations and demanded a new referendum for West Papua. However, their appeal was not supported by the UNGA and the issue of West Papua referendum was never put on the UNGA agenda.¹³ Despite that, the PIF representatives have continued performing this exercise of support for Papua annually in the UNGA.

Prior to attending the UNGA, the PIF met in mid-August 2019. Vanuatu succeeded in putting the Papua issue on the PIF agenda despite Australia's opposition,¹⁴ Benny Wenda spoke at the meeting and appealed for support. The PM of Vanuatu, Charlot Salwai, raise the matter at the UNGA on 28 September 2019, stating that "The resolution of the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum calls on the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua to conduct an assessment based on concrete proof regarding the human rights situation."¹⁵

However, a junior Indonesian diplomat from Ambon of Maluku, Rayyanul Sangadji, exercised the country's right of reply to Vanuatu's statement: "As an Indonesian with Melanesian roots, I can tell you we do not like to be clustered, categorised, or worse, divided by another, faraway country... Papua is, has [been] and will always be, part of Indonesia."¹⁶ He further argued that Papua has been recognized by UN Resolution no. 5414 as part of Indonesia and he could not understand why Vanuatu continued to support the separatists and disregard Indonesian sovereignty: "As a member of the UN, Vanuatu should learn how to respect other country's sovereignty."¹⁷

COMPARABLE TO EAST TIMOR?

Although the Papuan issue was not put onto the UN agenda, the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights will be sending a representative to Papua to look into the human rights situation. Due to allegations of racism and violations of human rights in Papua, opposition against the Indonesian government on Papua has not ended. Some fear that Papua question may develop into another East Timor situation, which may eventually result in UN intervention.

The situations are however quite dissimilar. East Timor was a Portuguese colony which experienced the decolonization process in 1975. Fearing that the left-wing Fretilin organization would seize power, Indonesia sent in troops to occupy East Timor and eliminate Fretilin.

That invasion was condemned by the United Nations. On 12 December 1975, the UNGA passed a resolution by 72 votes to 10, with 43 abstentions, calling on Indonesia to withdraw from East Timor.¹⁸ Ten days later, the UN Security Council passed a unanimous resolution making the same appeal.¹⁹ These resolutions had little effect on Indonesian actions towards East Timor. On 15 July 1976, the Indonesian parliament passed a bill on the formal integration of East Timor into Indonesia. This was signed two days later by Suharto, making

East Timor the 27th province of Indonesia.²⁰ On 1 December 1976, the UNGA passed a resolution condemning Indonesian military intervention and occupation of East Timor, and demanded that Indonesia withdraw its troops immediately and respect the self-determination rights of the East Timorese.

The resolution also said that the UN would insert the “East Timor Question” on the UN Agenda.²¹ The UNGA went on to pass a resolution annually, reaffirming the rights of East Timorese to self-determination. The Indonesian military continued however to suppress the East Timorese and to commit serious human rights violations. After the fall of Suharto, President B.J. Habibie eventually agreed to let the UN conduct a referendum in East Timor. This was held on 30 August 1999: 78.5% of East Timorese voted for independence and only 21.5% voted for autonomy within the Republic of Indonesia.²² With that, East Timor became an independent state.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are several factors that make it difficult for Papua to separate from Indonesia. Apart from being a legal part of Indonesia, Papua is a large and rich region, and strategically important for Indonesia. The Papuan population is not only small but also heterogeneous. There are over 300 tribes who are not always friendly with each other.²³ The armed opposition against the central government has not been high. Furthermore, there is a large non-Papuan migrant community. One source has even claimed that at the moment, the non-Papuans constitute 52% of the Papuan population, and Papuans only 48%.²⁴ Papua has also not gained much international attention and support, apart from that coming from the PIF countries.

There have also been new developments which have made the Papua issue more prominent. Firstly, there have been increased human rights violations and cases of racism against the Papuans. Secondly, the Papuans are now more educated (mainly Indonesian-educated). In fact, there are about 14,000 Papuan university students in the whole of Indonesia,²⁵ and their activities have become more noticeable. Thirdly, they have gradually externalized the issue to the whole of Indonesia and beyond. They have also succeeded in externalizing their problems in terms of human rights violations, to the extent that the UN Human Rights Commissioner now plans to visit Papua.

The Papuan question will be a challenge for President Jokowi in his second term. His administration has to address the allegations of human rights violations and racism if Jakarta is to have any hope of easing tensions.

¹ Papua is used here to refer to both the West Papua province and the Papua province.

² <https://www.jawapos.com/nasional/hukum-kriminal/27/09/2019/kerusuhan-di-wamena-32-meninggal-mobil-dihadang-dokter-dibakar/> (Accessed 30 September 2019).

³ <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4070351/kapolri-kami-sudah-prediksi-ada-aksi-yang-buat-rusuh-di-papua> (Accessed 25/9/2019).

⁴ John Saltford, *The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover of West Papua 1962-1969: The Anatomy of Betrayal*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003, pp.10-14.

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- ⁵ Irian was the Indonesian name for the Dutch New Guinea. It was changed to Papua in 1999 during the Gus Dur presidency and this term became legal in 2001. Since 2003, Papua has been divided into two provinces: West Papua and Papua.
- ⁶ M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia C 1300 to the Present*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981, p.259.
- ⁷ Ricklefs, p.259.
- ⁸ Saltford, pp.xxiv-xxv. Although it was supposed to be supervised by the UN representative, in reality, most of the voting was unsupervised. It was also reported that only Papuans who favoured integration with Indonesia were selected.
- ⁹ Saltford, pp.173-175.
- ¹⁰ “Ketua ULMWP Benny Wenda: Tak Ada Ruang Demokrasi di Papua”, *Tempo*, 8 September 2019, pp.36-37.
- ¹¹ Max Lane, The Papua Question in Indonesia: Recent Developments”, *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Perspective* Issue 2019 No.74 (19 September 2019), p.6.
- ¹² <https://en.tempo.co/read/1253734/un-bans-benny-wenda-to-enter-un-general-assembly-nick-meset> (Accessed 30/9/2019).
- ¹³ <https://telltthetruthnz.com/2018/09/22/compromised-vanuatu-delegation-in-this-year-un-general-assembly/> (Accessed 30/9/2019).
- ¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/12/indonesia-angered-as-west-papua-independence-raises-its-head-at-pacific-forum> (Accessed 30/9/2019)
- ¹⁵ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/399952/vanuatu-pm-calls-for-un-action-on-west-papua> (Accessed 1/10/2019).
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ <https://sp.beritasatu.com/dunia/indonesia-tuduh-vanuatu-dukung-agenda-separatisme-di-papua/577512/#> (Accessed 1/10/2019).
- ¹⁸ Leo Suryadinata, “Indonesia in 1976: A Year of Challenge”, *Southeast Asian Affairs 1977* (ISEAS), p117. Also, Roger S Clark, *Dekolonisasi Timor Timur dan Norma-Norma PBB tentang Hak Menentukan Nasib Sendiri dan Agresi*, Jakarta: ELSAM, 1999, pp.44-46.
- ¹⁹ Clark, pp. 46-47.
- ²⁰ Suryadinata, p.118.
- ²¹ Clark, pp. 48-50.
- ²² Harold Crouch, Indonesia: Democratization and the Threat of Disintegration”, *Southeast Asian Affairs 2000*, (ISEAS), p.122.
- ²³ Rodd McGibbon, *Plural Society in Peril: Migration, Economic Change and the Papua Conflict*, (Policy Studies 13, East West Center Washington, 2004, pp. 25-26.
- ²⁴ Information provided by Jim Elmslie, cited in Andreas Harsono, *Race, Islam and Power: Ethnic and Religious Violence in Post-Suharto Indonesia*. Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2019, p.201.; One source states that only 34% of the West Papuan population is non-Papuans, see Max Lane, p.9.
- ²⁵ <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2019/09/17/08364131/sebanyak-2047-mahasiswa-papua-dilaporkan-pulang-kampung-jumlahnya-masih-bisa> (Accessed 2/10/2019).

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