

Jakarta cracks down on independence rallies

The historical roots of the confrontation brewing in West Papua

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7 December 2000

A brutal crackdown by Indonesian security forces in West Papua over the last week, in which at least nine people have been killed and 61 arrested, has set the stage for a sharpening confrontation as the Indonesian government attempts to stamp out any open support for independence in the province.

The Indonesian authorities prepared the repression in advance of pro-independence demonstrations on December 1—the anniversary of a 1961 declaration of independence from Dutch colonial rule by tribal leaders. Four leaders of the Papuan Presidium Council (PPC), including its president Theys Eluay, were arrested last week and charged with subversion. As Provincial police chief Brigadier General Sylvanus Wenas bluntly told the press: “If someone wants to separate from his country it is a criminal act.”

On November 30, the day before the rallies, the military paraded through the streets of the capital Jayapura in trucks and armoured personnel carriers. Jayapura police chief Lieutenant Colonel Daud Sihombing told the assembled troops: “Your guns aren’t toys or decorations. They must be used to defend the unity of the Republic of Indonesia and to protect the community.”

On December 1, police shot dead two people in the town of Fak Fak, on the province’s west coast, claiming that they had been threatened with bows and arrows. The following day another seven people died in clashes in the south-eastern town of Merauke. According to police accounts, members of pro-independence militia—Satgas Papua or Papua Taskforce—had rioted after being told to haul down the Morning Star flag—a symbol of Papuan independence. In the early hours of December 3, more than 200 heavily armed riot police stormed the Irian Jaya Arts and Cultural Centre in Jayapura to remove Satgas Papua members, who had commandeered the building and used it as their headquarters for the past six months.

The go-ahead for the military suppression was given by President Abdurrahman Wahid in a speech on November 30. He insisted: “There should be no effort to proclaim [independence], secede from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, be that in Irian Jaya, or Papua, or in Aceh.” He warned that the security forces would take “firm action” against anyone attempting to do so.

Wahid’s statement indicates a marked shift from his previous conciliatory attitude to independence movements in West Papua and the northern Sumatran province of Aceh. After coming to office in October 1999, Wahid attempted to cultivate relations with Papuan leaders by sanctioning the raising of the Morning Star flag, and permitting the use of “West Papua” as well as “Irian Jaya” as the name of the province. He proposed the long-running conflicts be resolved by establishing a limited form of provincial autonomy for Aceh and West Papua as of May 2001.

But sections of the Indonesian ruling elite have become concerned that

any concession to separatists in the two provinces will lead to the break up of Indonesia, as other resource rich areas such as Riau demand to secede as well. Wahid has come under pressure from the military as well as the two major parties—Golkar, the political vehicle of the Suharto dictatorship, and the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) led by the so-called reformer Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri. Wahid, who is embroiled in a series of scandals and faces threats of impeachment, is heavily dependent on the support of Golkar and the PDI-P to shore up his increasingly vulnerable position.

The president’s attempts to consolidate a Papuan leadership that accepted autonomy rather than independence were effectively rebuffed in early June, when 3,000 Papuans attended a congress in Jayapura. Several hundred tribal leaders rejected the autonomy proposals and called on the international powers to recognise Papua as an independent state. The congress elected a 31-member Papua Presidium, headed by Theys Eluay, and called for negotiations with the Indonesian government over the terms of separation.

The government responded by preparing to crack down on the separatist movement. A cabinet meeting in early October, chaired by Megawati, insisted that there be no further concessions to the separatists and that the autonomy package had to be accepted. Expressions of support for Papuan independence, in particular the flying of the Morning Star flag, came under attack by the authorities.

On October 6, at least 30 people died in the town of Wamena, 290 kilometres from the provincial capital of Jayapura, after Indonesian security forces attempted to pull down a Morning Star flag. Initially, police killed six Papuans. Satgas Papua militia then led revenge attacks on Indonesian settlers, killing 24 people, including women and children. The government banned the flying of the flag but reached an agreement with presidium leaders on November 9 that permitted its use in five centres.

The separatist movement is rather loosely knit, comprising diverse political, tribal and regional tendencies. Some layers appear to have connections to the Free Papua Movement (OPM), which has fought a sporadic guerrilla war against the Indonesian military since the 1960s. Others, including presidium president Theys Eluay, had close connections to the previous Suharto regime and, following Suharto’s forced resignation in 1998, have opportunistically sought to find a new niche in the increasingly unstable political situation in West Papua and Indonesia as a whole.

Until June 1999, Eluay was a member of Suharto’s Golkar party, represented it in the provincial parliament and as such tacitly sanctioned its brutal military repression of the OPM and Papuan people over decades. Since being elected presidium president in June, he and his son have been prominent in the separatist protests. Another presidium member Yorris Rawayai, an associate of Eluay, is known to have close links to the former

Suharto dictatorship and is reportedly connected to the Jakarta underworld.

Elements of the separatist movement, the Satgas Papua militia in particular, has targetted the 700,000 immigrants who have been brought from other parts of Indonesia, under the country's transmigration program, to settle in West Papua. One Satgas Papua militia leader based on the island of Biak, Yacob Rumbiano, last week threatened to wage a war on the transmigrants. "If our brother and leader, chief Theys, is not released on December 1, we have made a commitment to attack non-Papuans," he said.

Many of these settlers, are typically poor peasants or workers from heavily populated regions, such as Java, Bali and Sulawesi. Some have reportedly starved to death trying to eke out a living on small plots of land with little or no government assistance. The racist attacks on transmigrants have served to play into the hands of the Indonesian authorities and military, who have exploited the ethnic divisions for years to buttress their rule. According to some reports, they have begun forming pro-Indonesian militia among the settlers.

The origins of the West Papuan separatist movement do not lie in any significant struggle against colonial rule. Rather, the push for a state on the western half of New Guinea was a by-product of the rearguard actions of the Dutch, who in their manoeuvres against the Indonesian independence movement following World War II attempted to foment separatist sentiment in the outer islands of the archipelago. In the Moluccas, the Christian elites who had close connections with the Dutch colonial rulers attempted to set up a South Moluccas Republic (RMS), which was quickly crushed by Indonesian troops in 1950. RMS guerrillas were responsible for razing a number of Muslim villages to the ground.

Following Indonesian independence in 1949, the Dutch clung onto West Papua as part of the settlement presided over by the United States and attempted to convert it into an ongoing base of operations in the region. Its status was to be determined by talks between the Netherlands and Indonesian governments which never took place. Previously the half island had been a neglected backwater lacking industry, basic infrastructure or services. Even by 1958, only about half the territory was effectively under Dutch control. Large parts of the highlands, where substantial sections of the population existed on subsistence agriculture, had little or no European contact and lacked roads or any economic development.

The Dutch set about rapidly creating an indigenous elite to which, if it became necessary, they could hand over control of an "independent" West Papua with close economic and political ties to the Netherlands. In the 1950s, budget expenditure on the territory trebled, the number of school enrolments doubled and the number of junior high schools increased from one in 1957 to seven in 1961. The process of "Papuanisation" accelerated as tensions with Indonesia sharpened after the nationalisation of Dutch-owned enterprises in Indonesia in 1958. The percentage of Papuans in lower grade colonial administrative posts rose from 38 percent in 1958 to 51 percent of all positions in 1961.

Concerned at the anti-imperialist rhetoric of President Sukarno and his cooperation with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), Holland and Australia set out an agreement in 1957 allowing for a possible union of West Papua and Australian-controlled Papua New Guinea on the basis of "ethnological and geographical affinity". Indonesia, for its part, had never accepted the arbitrary excision by the Dutch of a part of its former colonial empire and insisted that the country comprised the entire former Netherlands East Indies "from Sabang to Merauke".

As tensions came to head in 1961, the Dutch sought to establish the institutions for "independent" rule. In April, a Volksraad or Peoples Council was established comprising 38 members, of whom 16 were elected and 12 appointed. Significantly, neither Britain nor the US, both of whom were attempting to maintain influence within the Sukarno

government, sent a representative. In September, Dutch attempts at the United Nations proposing that an "international authority" take over control of the territory to "prepare the population for early self-determination under stable conditions" also floundered.

It was under these conditions in December 1961 that a group of tribal chiefs, with the tacit agreement if not active assistance of the Dutch, proclaimed "independence" in Jayapura complete with all the trappings—a national anthem, a flag and a coat of arms. The Morning Star flag based on the colours of the Dutch flag included six horizontal white stripes for the six districts and a white, five-pointed star—a symbol of a 19th century millenarian movement, known as the Mansren movement, similar to the "cargo cults" of Papua New Guinea.

In the same month, Sukarno issued a public statement calling for the liberation of West Papua from Dutch control and began moving airforce and paratroop units to Indonesia's eastern airfields. In early January, the president appointed Brigadier-General Suharto, the man who was to overthrow him some four years later, as commander of the military force to take back West Papua. The Dutch repelled initial Indonesian attempts to infiltrate its military but its plans to hold onto the territory or to convert it into a client state were undercut by the US, which was vying with the Soviet Union for influence in the Sukarno government and had close links with the Indonesian military.

In February 1962, the Kennedy administration made clear to Holland that the US would not support it in the event of a full-scale Indonesian military assault. In negotiations convened by UN Special Representative Ellsworth Bunker, Holland was forced to hand over West Papua to Indonesia under an agreement signed in August 1962. An interim UN administration was to control the territory until May 1963 and, as a sop to the West Papuans, "an act of free choice" was to be held in 1969 to determine the will of the local population.

Tensions between the Dutch-educated Papuan elite and Indonesian authorities rapidly emerged after Jakarta's takeover. Indonesia had far fewer resources to devote to the province than even the limited economic support provided by the Dutch. According to one account, "Papuan disillusionment swiftly set in at two levels—economic and political. Consumer goods, including clothes, cameras, bicycles, household necessities, beer, transistors and outboard motors to name a few, rapidly disappeared from shop counters, mainly into the hands of Indonesian troops and administration personnel, who swiftly traded them into the black markets of Jakarta; food became scarce and Papuans in the towns, many of whom had long become dependent in greater or lesser degree on bread and imported foodstuffs began cultivating their subsistence gardens again. Many were obliged to leave their houses which were commandeered by incoming Indonesians." [*New Guinea: Problems and Prospects*, Peter Hastings, p.225]

The new administration restricted movement between the towns, banned political meetings and the nascent political parties fostered by the Dutch, and jailed those who opposed the lack of democratic rights and deteriorating social conditions. The repressive methods a fostered deep resentment among Papuans and provoked resistance, including isolated acts of sabotage such as at the Shell Oil installations on Biak in August 1965.

Following the US-backed coup of 1965-66, the military regime continued the policies of Sukarno towards West Papua. Suharto, who had made a reputation in the campaign to "liberate" West Papua, had a stake in maintaining Indonesia's grip over the province. Revolts among the Arfak people in the Highlands in 1967 and 1969 were suppressed by the military.

As the junta's methods provoked opposition and sympathy for the incipient independence movement, the Free Papua Movement (OPM), the military responded with further repression, killing thousands of people. The OPM itself was a rather loose organisation set up by West Papuan

exiles with a headquarters in Holland and an office at the United Nations.

The rise to power of Suharto effectively put an end to any international support for West Papuan separatism. Having helped oust Sukarno and destroy the PKI in the massacres that followed, neither the US nor any other major power had any interest in supporting an independent and potentially unstable West Papua. Even Holland abandoned its ambitions in West Papua once its diplomatic relations and economic interests in Indonesia began to improve under the Suharto dictatorship.

As a result, the “act of free choice” in West Papua in 1969 organised by Indonesia under UN supervision was a complete farce. Basic democratic rights to free speech and assembly did not exist. No poll was taken. Instead hand-picked “electors” were assembled in the capitals of each of the eight administrative districts, subjected to lectures on the benefits of integration, bribed with petty gifts and then called on to vote. While the head of the UN team Ortiz Sanz cautiously criticised the procedure, the result was nevertheless ratified by the UN in November 1969 with 30 abstentions, mainly from African states, but no vote against.

West Papua has considerable natural resources and hosts the world's largest gold mine—the Freeport mine, owned jointly by the Freeport McMoRan company of the United States, Rio Tinto of Britain and the Jakarta government. The province has for many years produced significant quantities of oil for the Anglo-Dutch firm Shell and others, and has been subjected to intensive timber cutting. Atlantic Richfield Co, a subsidiary of BP Amoco, is developing the world's largest gas field, off the coast of West Papua.

The failure of Indonesian governments to utilise the revenue obtained from the plundering of West Papua's resources to alleviate the endemic poverty and backwardness of the province has fueled mounting resentment to rule from Jakarta. West Papua ranks sixth among Indonesia's 27 provinces in its contribution to the national economy and the Freeport mine is the country's largest taxpayer. Yet it has the poorest health standards in Indonesia with the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. Malnutrition is estimated to affect one-fifth of its people, including half the children under five. Freeport mine has only recently begun to pay a miniscule \$US5 million a year to the provincial government.

Moreover, the hostility towards Jakarta has been compounded by the repressive methods used by the Indonesian authorities who have ridden roughshod over the democratic rights and cultural sensibilities of the Papuan people. In an effort to establish a social and political base for the Indonesian presence, the government flooded the province with settlers under its transmigration program and deliberately inflamed ethnic tensions. Out of a total population of about 2.5 million, over a quarter are transmigrants. Most of the top administrative posts have been held by officials from outside the province.

The downfall of Suharto in May 1998 has brought to the surface all the underlying resentments and tensions that had been suppressed under the boot of the military. Across the Indonesian archipelago—in Aceh, Riau, Kalimantan and the Malukuas as well as in West Papua—“independence” from Jakarta has come to be associated, in the minds of ordinary workers and villagers, with an end to authoritarian rule and the securing of basic democratic rights and a better standard of living. These sentiments have been cynically exploited by separatist leaders in order to advance a political agenda, which is just as inimical to the interests of ordinary working people as that of the Indonesian administration.

The resolution adopted at the Papuan Peoples Congress in June makes clear that the underlying agenda of the West Papuan indigenous elites is to maintain the profit system and foreign capital inflows along with all that is entailed—low wages, sweatshop conditions, lack of services and environmental degradation. The congress called upon “the Papuan people to behave cordially and in a supportive manner towards investment activities in Papua,” adding the meaningless caveat, “provided that the

investors acknowledge the ancestral rights of the owners and behave respectfully towards the environment and culture of Papuan society.”

The perspective of “independence” for half of the island of New Guinea is simply incompatible with the realities of global capitalism. Not only would a West Papuan statelet be completely dependent economically on loans from international banks and investment by transnational corporations but its government would be little more than a client administration to one or other of the major powers. A year after Indonesian troops left East Timor, workers, young people and villagers are coming face to face with the bitter truth that “independence” has not led to the granting of democratic rights or the improvement of living standards. All but a tiny minority of East Timorese lack decent jobs, access to basic social services and, in some cases, even adequate shelter.

Like their East Timorese counterparts, the ambitions of the pro-independence leaders in West Papua are to establish themselves as stakeholders in the exploitation of the resources of the province, most importantly the cheap labour of working people. The working class and oppressed masses in West Papua, like workers and the poor in East Timor, Aceh and in other parts of Indonesia, can only defend their class interests through a fight for their political independence from all those who defend and support the present social and economic order. This requires the development of a socialist perspective, aimed at unifying the labouring masses of the entire archipelago in a common struggle against all forms of oppression and the profit system itself.



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