Documents confirm US colluded in Indonesia's 1969 incorporation of Papua

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Recently declassified documents from the archives of the US State Department have shed a little more light on one of the many grubby chapters of US foreign policy in the Cold War period: how Washington worked with the UN and Indonesia's Suharto dictatorship to stage a phoney "Act of Free Choice" in West Papua in 1969.

West Papua, or West Irian, remained under Dutch control following Indonesian independence in 1949, as part of the settlement presided over by Washington. Talks on its future status between the Netherlands and Indonesia were meant to follow, but never took place.

The Dutch, seeking to cling onto West Papua as a base of operations in the region, cultivated a small educated Papuan elite and promoted the idea of an "independent" Papua. For President Sukarno, however, the incorporation of West Papua into Indonesia became a nationalist rallying cry to bolster his shaky regime. In response to a declaration of "Papuan independence" in 1961, Indonesian troops took over the territory.

US President Kennedy, keen to strengthen relations with Sukarno, sided with Indonesia and compelled the Netherlands to sign an agreement in New York in August 1962. Following a short period under UN administration, West Papua was handed over to Indonesian control in 1963 subject only to a UN-supervised "Act of Free Choice" (AFC) scheduled for 1969.

Following the 1965-66 US-backed coup led by General Suharto in Indonesia, US administrations, first of Lyndon Johnson and then Richard Nixon, were adamant that West Papua had to remain part of Indonesia. Washington's main concern was to ensure the stability of the Suharto junta as the lynchpin of US strategic policy in a region increasingly destabilised by the Vietnam War.

The documents collated by the US-based private research organisation National Security Archives [www.narchive.org] and released last month primarily cover the period 1967-69—that is the lead up to the AFC. They reveal the cynicism with which US and UN officials approached the task of "consulting" Papuans in July 1969 and then getting the outcome rubberstamped by the UN General Assembly in November 1969.

Cables to the US State Department from the Embassy in Jakarta made clear that the wishes of the Papuan population were of no concern to the US. The top priority was to ensure the survival of Suharto as a bulwark in the region. There were economic interests as well. In 1967, Suharto opened up Indonesia to US investment. One of the first beneficiaries was the New Orleans-based Freeport corporation, which develop a huge gold and copper mine at Grasberg in Papua.

In August 1968, US Ambassador in Jakarta, Marshall Green, telegraphed Washington, explaining: "Retention of West Irian as full fledged Indonesian province is a political necessity for Suharto government and for [Indonesian foreign minister] Adam Malik.... [L]oss of territory through 'Act of Free Choice' would undermine Malik and deal serious blow to Indonesia's political stability.... [P]olitical Muslims and jingoists ... would use loss of West Irian as basis for all out attack on Suharto administration and moderates who are now setting Indonesian policy. They could set in motion trends which would unseat this government...."

Green warned, however, that the US should work behind the scenes and "not become directly involved in the issue" but at the same time make the US stance clear. "[I]t would be unrealistic for any UN member who knows the situation in West Irian to hold out for free and direct elections, nor should we refer to UN 'supervision' when this is not stipulated in Agreement," he declared.

It had already become clear from a US consular visit to Papua in early 1968 that Indonesia's presence was "expressed primarily in the form of the army". The US consul noted the "antipathy or outright hatred believed to be harboured towards Indonesia" in more developed areas. "It is the opinion of most observers in the area that Indonesia will not accept independence for West Irian and will not permit a plebiscite which would reach such an outcome," he added.

The reason for the hostility was evident. Following the takeover in 1963, Indonesian authorities cracked down on any opposition to their presence. In the aftermath of Suharto's coup, the military imposed the same repressive measures as it used throughout the archipelago, which resulted in the genocide of at least half a million supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and other political opponents.

In the lead-up to the AFC, the crackdown intensified. A June 1969 survey by a US Embassy official in Jakarta reported stepped-up police and military efforts to prevent any public expression of opposition, including "preventive arrests since late April of known Free Papua activists, round-up in Djajapura of one man-one vote demonstration leaders". It gave details of the isolation by the military of revolts in more remote areas, including in North Biak, Bird's Head and Medunamani.

The report noted, however, that the Papuan opposition lacked

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cohesion, making a broad revolt unlikely and, in any case, the Indonesians were ready to “contain and, if necessary, suppress it”. The official assured Washington that the Indonesian government was sensitive to its international “image” and would “avoid actions that will reflect negatively on the credibility of the AFC in the sensitive eyes of the Netherlands, Australia and with [UN Secretary General] U Thant.”

The survey concluded by stating its agreement with State Department policies, adding: “US government has nothing to gain by interfering in an already complex problem and thereby disrupting present fruitful relationship with the government of Indonesia.”

Frank Galbraith, who took over from Green as US ambassador, was well aware that the upcoming AFC would be a farce. In a memo to Washington in early July 1969, he estimated that “85 to 90 percent” of the population was “in sympathy with the Free Papua cause”. He observed that Indonesian military operations, which had already killed thousands of civilians, “had stimulated fears and rumours of intended genocide among the Irianese”.

President Nixon, who had taken office in early 1969, visited Indonesia immediately before the AFC. In a briefing prior to the trip, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger focussed attention on the US priority—assuring Suharto’s support in the region as the US sought to extricate itself from Vietnam. Describing Suharto as “a moderate military man” who achieved “impressive results” in “cleaning up the mess left by Sukarno”, Kissinger urged Nixon to impress on the dictator “a sense of our shared purposes and goals in Southeast Asia”.

On Papua, Kissinger strongly advised against any discussion. He described the AFC as “a series of consultations, rather than a direct election, which would be almost meaningless among the stone age cultures of New Guinea”. He noted the presence of a UN observer on the scene but “we assume that U Thant will go along with the Indonesian form of the Act of Free Choice”. Because of the anti-Indonesian opposition, Kissinger advised Nixon to “avoid any US identification with that act”.

Initially there were concerns in Jakarta that the UN observer Oritz Sanz might upset proceedings. Green had telegraphed Washington in August 1968 asking if anyone in the American UN mission had a “close personal relationship” with Sanz. He insisted that “given the high stakes riding on Oritz Sanz’s mission and importance of his getting off on right foot, I believe we should do anything we can indirectly to make him aware of political realities”.

Green had little to worry about. A US official at the UN began acquainting Sanz with the “political realities” before he left New York. Sanz “looks forward to making discreet personal contact with Ambassador Green,” he reported. Sanz worked with US officials in urging Suharto to dress up the AFC. Suharto was under pressure from elements of his regime to simply call off the process.

A US Embassy memorandum recorded a conversation in April 1969 in Sanz’s office involving Indonesian officials. Sanz pointed out that the 1962 New York agreement provided for the right of freedom of speech and assembly in West Irian. In reply, an Indonesian official referred to Malik’s attitude, which was that if such rights were granted in West Irian they would have to be granted in the rest of Indonesia. If such concessions were made, Malik was reported to have said, “the Government of Indonesia would be facing rebellion from various parts of the country within 15 days”.

Nothing resembling democratic rights was permitted in West Papua. The AFC consisted of “consultations” over six weeks in July/August 1969 with just over a thousand handpicked tribal leaders. No popular vote took place. Indonesian authorities ran the proceedings, with a strong military presence. Through a mixture of bribes and threats, the tribal chiefs unanimously “agreed” to the incorporation of Papua into Indonesia.

The final hurdle for Jakarta and Washington was to get the UN to endorse this farce. It was delayed as late as possible and timed to ensure other issues were dominating the UN General Assembly. Sanz was critical of aspects of the AFC, but, as the US documents confirm, this was mainly for show.

On November 17, 1969, just two days prior to the UN vote, US Secretary of State William Rogers, Green, Malik and other US and Indonesian officials held a meeting in which they stressed their common desire for a quick UN decision without any debate. Malik raised concerns that several French-speaking African nations were preparing to object. Rogers reassured Malik that he had been in touch with these delegations and emphasised to them that they had no grounds for objecting. He cautioned against the US being “too active”. “What we want to do,” he said, “is to be discreet but at the same time persuasive.”

The persuasion, it appears, worked. Sanz’s report was read by U Thant without any further comment. The General Assembly “took note” of the Act of Free Choice, with 30 abstentions, thereby giving its imprimatur to the sham.

US support for Indonesia over Papua helped to cement a close relationship with the Suharto dictatorship, which lasted for more than three decades. Successive US presidents turned a blind eye to the savage repression meted out by this “moderate military man” against any form of political opposition, not only in Papua, but throughout the country.

Kissinger personally benefited from the Indonesian takeover. As a director of the US Freeport-McMoRan, which continues to run the huge Papuan mine, he reportedly received an annual fee of more than $500,000 over the period 1995-2001. In addition, he has been a major stockholder in the company and his consulting firm has received large fees.

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