

Report highlights political persecution in Indonesia

John Braddock
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Despite efforts to portray Indonesia as “democratic” following the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, a recent report by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) demonstrates the government’s continuing abuse of basic democratic rights.

The 43-page report, “Prosecuting Political Aspiration: Indonesia’s Political Prisoners,” examines the plight of more than 100 Papuan and Moluccan pro-independence activists imprisoned for their political views. It found that incarceration, intimidation and torture continue to be routinely used in suppressing political opposition.

The report, released last month, is based on more than 50 jailhouse interviews with political prisoners, conducted between December 2008 and May 2010. Most of the cases concern activists imprisoned for organising rallies or participating in ceremonies involving the raising of the flags of separatist movements in Papua and the southern Moluccan islands.

In 2007, the Indonesian government banned the display of flags or logos that have the same features as “organisations, groups, institutions or separatist movements”. The Papuan Morning Star flag and the “Benang Raja” flag of the Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS) fall under this ban.

Both these movements have their roots in the rearguard actions of Dutch imperialism following World War II. The Dutch fomented separatist opposition in the outer islands of the Indonesian archipelago in a bid to undermine the Indonesian independence movement centred in Java. Following independence in 1949, the Christian elites in the Moluccas proclaimed a republic that was crushed by Indonesian troops in 1950.

In the wake of Suharto’s fall, the Indonesian regime deliberately stoked religious and racial tensions, including between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccas, to divert attention from the country’s economic and social crisis. In 1999, clashes between armed Christian and Muslim gangs left

at least 200 dead and many more injured, and devastated sections of Ambon City and other areas. More than 30,000 people were left homeless and displaced.

The Indonesian armed forces, which had been central to the brutal Suharto dictatorship, exploited the clashes to justify a continuing role in the country’s internal affairs. The military built up specialist units, including a 3,300-strong anti-riot force made up of army, police, navy, air force and intelligence agency personnel. Many of the anti-democratic laws used to suppress political opposition under Suharto were kept in place and later justified under the banner of Washington’s “war on terror”.

Most of the prisoners interviewed by HRW had been convicted of rebellion or treason under the Indonesian Criminal Code. Many have been sentenced to 10 years or more in prison. In several cases, activists were tortured by police and prison guards while in detention, principally by members of the Detachment 88 Anti-Terror Squad. Some have faced other forms of mistreatment and denial of medical treatment.

According to Tim Advokasi Masyarakat Sipil Maluku (Tamasu), an organisation working to assist Moluccan prisoners, there are currently 70-75 individuals in prison for their involvement in separatist activities. This includes 21 people arrested over a protest in June 2007 during National Family Day festivities at the Merdeka Stadium in Ambon. Local Alifuru performers, led by elementary school teacher Johan Teterisa, danced a traditional war dance and unfurled the RMS flag in front of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and foreign guests.

Yudhoyono responded by telling the audience that there would be “no tolerance” of separatism. Officials immediately arrested a number of the dancers and took them to the nearby headquarters of the counter-terrorism police, who then launched a major crackdown and arrested around 100 alleged activists. Teterisa and Ferdinand Waas, a village chief who had aided and advised the dancers, were later prosecuted for treason and given prison terms of 15 and 10 years respectively.

Teterisa told HRW that Detachment 88 officers demanded that he sign a statement calling on the Moluccas Sovereignty Front (FKM) to disband. When he refused, police beat him almost continuously for 12 hours every day for 11 days. They used iron rods and stones, and slashed him with a bayonet. In another instance, officials kicked Teterisa out of a second-floor room and down a set of stairs. Teterisa told HRW that his chest was crushed, a number of his ribs were broken, and he was covered with bruises.

In another case, Reimond Tuapattinaya described his beatings by members of the same police unit: “If they held an iron bar, we got the iron bar. If they held a wooden bat, we got the wooden bat. If they held a wire cable, we got cabled. Shoes. Bare hands. They used everything. The torture was conducted inside Tantui [prison] and the Moluccan police headquarters. I was tortured for 14 days in Tantui, day and night. They picked me up in the morning, and returned me, bleeding, to my cell in the evening.” Tuapattinaya is serving a seven-year prison sentence for treason.

Similar treatment has been meted out to Papuan independence activists. The Papuan region, which has been part of Indonesia since 1963, contains considerable natural resources, including oil, gas, gold and copper. Tensions between the Papua elite, which had been groomed for independence by the Dutch, and the Indonesian government emerged shortly after Jakarta took over control. Local resentment was further fuelled by the phoney character of the UN-supervised “act of free choice” in 1969, the settling of migrants from Java and Sumatra in Papua and Jakarta’s trampling on local culture.

Tens of thousands of Indonesian troops are deployed in the province to suppress the limited guerrilla resistance by the Free Papua Movement (OPM), along with any expression of separatist sentiment. The military presence includes 1,000 Kopasus special commandos, who were notorious for some of the Suharto regime’s worst crimes, including arbitrary arrests and the killing of political opponents.

After the fall of Suharto, the Indonesian government for a time permitted the Morning Star flag to be flown on the condition that it was raised alongside but placed lower than the Indonesian flag. The concession was part of the government’s efforts to reach a deal with local Papuan elites to settle outstanding grievances, including a greater share of the revenue from the province’s resources. A tougher line against separatism was adopted when Abdurrahman Wahid was ousted and Megawati Sukarnoputri installed as president in 2001.

Nazarudin Bunas, the head of the Ministry of Law and Human Rights in Jayapura, Papua reported that as of February

2010 there were 48 Papuan prisoners in gaol for treason. Individual case files for six of them are contained in the HRW report.

The most prominent is Filep Jacob Samuel Karma, aged 51, who has been in the Abepura prison for five years. In May 2005, a court convicted him of treason for organising a pro-independence rally in December 2004. The event was attended by hundreds of Papuan students, who shouted “freedom!” and displayed the Morning Star flag. When police attempted to break up the rally, clashes broke out and the crowd attacked the police with blocks of wood, rocks, and bottles. The police responded by firing into the crowd. Karma was arrested and charged with treason.

Karma was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment. Since then, Karma says that authorities have denied him urgently needed medical attention. Doctors who examined him in 2009 recommended he immediately be sent for urology surgery in Jakarta but prison authorities blocked the transfer. Between December 2009 and February 2010, Karma, his family and supporters negotiated for the medical transfer while an NGO coalition mounted a campaign to raise funds. But both the Ministry of Law and Human Rights and prison authorities have continued to deny the request.

The HRW report, which focuses on individual cases, claims the jailings are an “ugly stain on Indonesia’s recent improvements in human rights”. In fact, the abuses underscore the fact that behind a democratic façade the post-Suharto regime continues the systematic suppression of any opposition regarded as a political threat. Many leading political figures, including Yudhoyono who was a top general under Suharto, have direct links to the military dictatorship.

The author also recommends:

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